

DO GOOD PEOPLE FINISH LAST?

A movie's opening scene features a marauding band of heavily armed and armored warriors on horseback decimating a village, burning its small huts and mercilessly cutting down defenseless villagers with spears and swords. Almost immediately something interesting happens to the audience. Although we know it is a fictional movie about a faraway time and place and people, we choose sides. Even more interesting, virtually everyone in the theater will side with the poor peasants ravaged by highly trained invaders.

Our impulse toward justice helps explain why we identify with the weaker side. When a power imbalance is exploited by a stronger party, it just seems unfair. No one likes bullies, so we root for the underdog and assume that the oppressors should repent or suffer punishment. Since siding with those who are treated unfairly is an almost automatic response, we might conclude that this is an indicator of moral truth. How else could we explain why this response is so universally felt?

NIETZSCHE: TRANSVALUING MORAL VALUE

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) acknowledges that taking the side of the downtrodden may be an almost universal response but argues that it provides no insight into moral goodness. Instead, he believes

that siding with the weak runs contrary to true human nature and that rooting for the underdog signals that our ideas of good and evil are so confused that we don't recognize them as a complete perversion of morality. To clear up our confusion, Nietzsche says that we need to acknowledge that all living things are driven by a **will to power**. Life is a struggle in which "goodness" is a label that should be reserved for those whose power allows them to rise to the top. In the scenario above, the warriors embrace their will to power and unapologetically use strength to conquer. Nietzsche calls this **master morality**, the open and free expression of our true nature. But what about those Nietzsche refers to as "slaves," those who are dominated by the masters? Nietzsche says that slaves, too, are driven by the will to power. It cannot be otherwise; the will to power is the essence of human nature. The critical difference between the slave and the master is the *ability* to impose one's power on others, and the slave lacks the capacity to dominate.

If Nietzsche is correct about the current distortion of values, how did our notions of good and evil become so skewed that we find it natural to cheer for the weak? That answer requires that we engage in a **genealogy of morals**. If we push back the fog of history, Nietzsche argues that we discover master morality, a more primitive and purer notion of goodness. In the early stage of this genealogy, "good" refers to the ability to get things done and to impose one's will on others. Those who are good in this sense become the nobility, the masters who rule the slave class. What attracts Nietzsche to the masters is their freedom and joy. Freedom and joy is not simply the consequence of having no obligations to those conquered. It is a profoundly inward thing. Masters are not only unimpeded by the conquered weaklings; they are uninhibited by any sense of duty to truth, God, or conscience. Their actions are in perfect sync with their will to power, and their freedom from internal and external controls brings a complete and pure happiness.

Since "good" denotes effectiveness and power for master morality, its opposite, "bad," refers to the powerless and ineffective. The slave is the epitome of powerlessness. As stated earlier, slaves have the *will* to power but lack actual power. Thus, **slave morality** expresses the will

to power not by free actions but by reacting to the masters. Nietzsche refers to this reaction as *ressentiment*, or resentment (he used the French term because he considered the French to be history's biggest resenters). The masters have the power to set the agenda; the slaves can only react, and thus they lack the masters' freedom and exultation.

As we move to the present in our genealogy, we discover something odd: the slaves seem to have won the day. After all, you and your friends were cheering for the weak and defenseless at the movie theater. So why does slave morality seem to be so right? According to Nietzsche, slave morality's main tool involves redefining words. "Good" no longer means effective and powerful. The language connected with good and bad now takes on what we would call a "moral" meaning in which the master power is deemed bad (notice how "bad" no longer means ineffective). Likewise, qualities like sacrifice, mercy, meekness, and charity are no longer signs of weakness, as they were under master morality. Slave morality considers these dispositions virtuous.

Nietzsche finds this shift in morals distasteful. First, it distorts the world by pretending that truth, goodness, beauty, and reality are fixed and unchanging. In Nietzsche's view, however, reality is constantly dynamic. A world in motion forces us to respond as new circumstances arise. The strong can handle this, but the weak are overwhelmed by it. Thus, "slaves" exchange the ever-changing physical world for a transcendent spiritual world that contains eternal and absolute truths. Second, Nietzsche views slave morality as blatantly dishonest because of the weak attempt to convince themselves and others that they are giving up power in sacrifice and service. However, because they *are* the will to power, this can never be done. Instead, the slaves use the redefined concept of "goodness" to bring the masters down to their level, where they can be dominated by the idea that goodness is expressed in weakness. Moreover, Nietzsche detests slave morality because it quashes freedom and joy. Instead of the intuitive and uninhibited actions of earlier masters, slave morality now judges goodness by an external standard of eternal and universal truth. Thus freedom is always limited by something outside us, and this external something convicts us for our own shortcomings, robbing us of the joy of acting according to our will to power.

These aspects of slave morality help explain why Nietzsche says very few positive things about Christianity, which praises gentleness and mercy and offers a Savior who gives himself in sacrifice. However, Nietzsche says that even here the will to power is never absent. Standing behind the Suffering Servant is an omnipotent God who knows all and judges the powerful. This version of slave morality is a two-edged sword for Christians. On the one hand, God redeems the suffering of the weak in the next world (the world of eternal and unchanging truths), even though the powerful continue their oppressive ways in the present. On the other hand, part of what an all-knowing God knows is that we, too, as the offspring of the will to power, desire to act exactly as the dominating masters do. We just lack the power to pull it off. Since an all-knowing God knows what we really want to do, our will to power is directed against us through conscience. We cannot conquer others because we lack the ability, but we still want to. And God knows it. Thus, through guilt and remorse, we beat ourselves up instead. This satisfies our will to power, but in a perverse and joyless way.

Despite the fact that the slaves have perverted the "true meaning" of goodness, Nietzsche sees the present as a **twilight of the idols**. Throughout its history, philosophy has been dominated by the false gods of truth, goodness, unchanging reality, and God. But these "idols" are increasingly challenged, and Nietzsche believes that we stand on the verge of a new era in which the strong will embrace **nihilism** (*nihil* = nothing), the belief that no meaning, truth, reality, or external standards of goodness exist. This brings about a **transvaluation of values**, a return to a master morality in which the will to power regains its joyful and free expression. Nietzsche calls the person who exemplifies the recovery of master morality the *Übermensch* (usually translated as "Overman" or "Superman"). While the weak view nihilism as something to be mourned, the *Übermensch* views the lack of truth, purpose, and goodness as the opportunity to remake the world according to one's desires. Thus nihilism is a positive thing; the strong have a blank canvas on which to express their will to power.

It may seem odd that a chapter on ethics opens with Nietzsche, since many consider his ideas to be the polar opposite of what they

view as the ethical ideal. Most people think of ethics as guidance for living peacefully and respectfully with others. In contrast, Nietzsche's philosophy can be seen as a version of **ethical egoism**, the idea that a person's primary duty is to oneself and one's individual goals. Our quest to survive and thrive occurs within nature's contest for the survival of the fittest. For him, the only real difference between humans and other living things is that we are aware of and reflective about exercising our will to power. Given this view of human nature, it is not difficult to see that "good" will refer to the effectiveness of our efforts to survive and dominate.

A second reason Nietzsche's version of ethical egoism sounds contrary to typical notions of ethics is that, for him, our egocentric orientation is not a choice; it is our very essence. Nietzsche's rejection of objective truth reflects his conviction that our views about the world are determined by our biases and desires. In other words, our beliefs are expressions of our will to power. We are selfish and desire to control others. We just need to be honest about it.

Another way to see Nietzsche's ethics is as a variation on virtue ethics. We have noted that he has a distinct view of human nature: we are governed by the will to power. Achieving the goals of this nature requires that we nurture certain habits and dispositions. For Nietzsche, these virtues include power, honesty, lack of conscience, and joy in conquest. So if you believe that humans *are* the will to power, Nietzsche's idea that goodness involves dominating others and employing power to mold a meaningless universe into conformity with our desires will seem like a logical conclusion. However, if you believe that human beings are relational beings whose ideal is achieved by considering the wants, needs, and rights of others, the virtues necessary to attain this ideal will be very different from Nietzsche's list. In short, what you think is virtuous will depend on what you believe about human nature.

VIRTUE ETHICS

A different concept of human nature distinguishes Aristotle's ethical system from Nietzsche's. In fact, Aristotle argues that the first step toward the moral life involves a determination about what it is to be

human. Defining “human” is part of a bigger picture for Aristotle, because he believes that everything has a purpose, goal, or ideal. The word he uses for this goal is *telos*. In Aristotle’s view, all our actions can be described in a teleological (goal-oriented) manner, because we do not simply act randomly. Instead, if you ask a person why they are peeling a potato or studying for a trig test, their answer points toward a purpose, such as preparing mashed potatoes or fulfilling a math requirement.

If our actions aim at some goal, two questions immediately pop up: What gives us the impulse to pursue goals, and how do we know that our eyes are set on the right goals? For Aristotle, the correct answer to both questions requires a proper understanding of the soul. Like most Greek thinkers of his day, Aristotle believed that the soul is essential to our identity. However, he departs from many peers by stating that not just human beings, but anything that has life possesses a soul. There are, therefore, different types of souls. The most basic type of soul is the *vegetative soul* possessed by plant life. Its highest function is to gather nutrition from the surrounding environment in order to sustain life. An intermediate type of soul is the *animal* (or sensitive) *soul*, which has not only the nutritive function found in plants but also the additional capacities of sensation and movement. Humans have the highest form of soul, a *rational soul*, which possesses all the abilities of the animal soul plus *reason* and *will*. Thus, in answer to the first question above, Aristotle argues that our rational soul gives us the impulse to seek a *telos*. Rational souls are made to learn and to develop moral virtue.

The second question—how do we know if we are seeking the proper *telos*?—is answered by the type of soul we have. For Aristotle, a fundamental principle is that our highest capacities determine our purpose. Because reason and will are our soul’s most exalted abilities, the human *telos* is to live rationally and to choose wisely. Before we get to what this means, though, it is important to highlight another fundamental principle of Aristotle’s thought: *the lower fulfills its purpose when it supports the higher*. Living a good life involves, on the soul’s lowest function—its nutritive capacity—keeping our bodies alive and healthy. Nutrition supports the intermediate functions—movement

and sensation—that enable us to gather the data that reason, our highest capacity, requires for its work. While the physical is inferior to the intellectual, our soul’s higher capacities rely on the lower functions to reach its goal. When all this comes together as it should, the result is *eudaimonia*. While this word usually translates as happiness, Aristotle does not view it as a transient emotion but as a state of being. *Eudaimonia* is a condition in which we flourish as humans who function according to an ideal.

How does all this relate to ethics? The key term is *virtue*. “Virtue” is our English translation of the Greek word *arête*, which might be best defined as “excellence.” When something is virtuous, it functions at optimal power. Aristotle breaks this down further by distinguishing between intellectual virtues and moral virtues. The intellectual virtues include such qualities as insight, understanding, fairness, and wisdom. Among the moral virtues are dispositions such as courage, generosity, truthfulness, and patience. Because of this focus, Aristotle’s approach is generally referred to as *virtue ethics*.

Although Aristotle divides virtues into two categories, in practice they are closely related. For example, the intellectual virtue of fairness is important in a research setting so that we allow the evidence to guide our conclusions rather than following our biases and desires. However, fairness also has moral value in that it demands that we treat all people with respect and equity. The second similarity is that both types of virtue are acquired in a similar manner. We are not born virtuous but have the *capacity* for the virtues at birth. For these capacities to move toward excellence, their proper *telos*, they must be properly trained.

Virtue training starts with rules like “no TV until the homework is done” or “don’t whack your sister with a bat.” In other words, it begins with prohibitions and limitations on our behaviors from outside sources like parents, social expectations, and laws. The aim of these limits is to help us develop habits that are consistent with the virtues, such as discipline in learning and refraining from injuring others. The next step toward virtue is recognizing the values embedded in the rules. Prohibitions against stealing arise because we should respect others’ property. The aim is to move beyond rules to comprehend

the moral values that the rules protect. Another important stage of virtue development is that we don't simply do what is right through sheer willpower or fear of punishment. The truly virtuous person loves the qualities and values found in the virtues. The goal is to develop an inner disposition so that desiring the good, and acting on it, becomes our default switch. In short, becoming virtuous is a project in becoming a different person—one who takes pleasure in intellectual rigor and moral integrity and thus exemplifies the telos of our humanity.

A major obstacle on the path toward virtue is emotion. Although reason should control us, feelings can cloud our judgments and cause us to act impulsively. When someone demeans us, we feel anger and want to lash out. Our quest for thoughtful moderation often runs up against our desire for pleasure. Aristotle does not want to deny the validity of these natural impulses. For example, it is appropriate to feel fear on the battlefield. The adrenaline burst we get in fearful situations can make us a more effective fighter, but our fears may also cause us to make a quick exit so we can fight another day. How do we know when we should stay and fight and when we should bail out?

Emotion provides the energy behind our actions and is an example of how the lower serves the higher. However, reason's higher functions need to channel our passions toward virtue by finding the **golden mean** (a phrase Aristotle did not himself use but that is often used to describe his view). Every virtue is situated at a midpoint (or mean) between two extremes that Aristotle calls **vices**. One extreme is excess; the other is deficiency. For example, the virtue of courage stands between the vices of cowardice (deficiency of courage), in which fear overtakes us, and rashness (excess of courage), which occurs when we don't give sufficient attention to actual danger. Likewise, generosity is the golden mean between stinginess and financial irresponsibility, and the virtue of proper self-image is the midpoint between the excess of vanity and the deficiency of false modesty.

Aristotle believes that the virtues are objective moral standards needed by all people if they are to reach their telos in life. In other words, he believes in moral absolutes. At the same time, he argues that circumstances will determine how these virtues should be exercised.

Depending on one's net worth, a one-hundred-dollar donation might be quite generous for one person and downright stingy for another. What constitutes a moderate diet for an Olympic athlete in training may be quite different from an eighty-year-old confined to a wheelchair. Reason must make judgments about how we apply universal virtues to concrete situations.

At the beginning of Aristotle's ethical reflections, he observes that the degree of precision expected from a discipline depends on the nature of the subject. Mathematics allows for a great deal of precision, and there are ways to check answers to determine whether we have the right one. The natural sciences are less exact than mathematics, but some of their conclusions come with a high degree of probability. Aristotle says that ethics is messier. It can identify the character qualities we should possess, but these virtues don't always provide precise guidance about what to do in a specific situation. Thus, while virtue ethics is certainly concerned about our actions, its primary focus is on our character. The moral life is about making us different, and better, people—individuals who grow toward the telos of moral and intellectual perfection.

Virtue ethics was the predominant approach of classical philosophy, and its focus on character formation makes it easy to see how this approach easily adapts to Christian ethics. Christianity calls people to mirror Christ's character in patience, kindness, goodness, and self-control, qualities that sound a lot like Aristotle's virtues. These parallels led early Christians to incorporate classical philosophy's four **cardinal virtues** (cardinal = fundamental)—temperance, courage, prudence (or wisdom), and justice—into their ethical systems. These four virtues, as we will see in the next chapter, originate in *Plato* and are adopted by later Greek and Roman philosophers. While early and medieval Christians such as *Augustine* and *Aquinas* saw the cardinal virtues as critical for the well-lived Christian life, they also argued that, by themselves, they were not sufficient. Thus, they added the three **theological virtues** of faith, hope, and love (or charity) to round out the basic qualities the believer needs for a full and healthy life.

Some recent forms of Christian virtue ethics argue that it is not enough simply to amend the list of classical virtues. Instead, scholars

like Stanley Hauerwas (1940–) stress the *distinctiveness* of the Christian virtues. Hauerwas argues that Christians should see themselves as “resident aliens,” called to unique loves, commitments, concepts of power, and ways of living that require unique virtues. Thus, for example, while classical ethicists often discussed courage in the context of war, Hauerwas argues that peacemaking is a primary value of the church. Cast in this light, courage is not about standing firm in war but instead refers to standing in protest against the powers that make war. In short, he agrees with Aristotle that virtues are vital in the people-making process but believes that Christianity has very different views about what constitutes the ideal person.

UTILITARIANISM: THE GREATEST HAPPINESS FOR THE GREATEST NUMBER

While the ancient and medieval thinkers were comfortable with the lack of precision characteristic of virtue ethics, many philosophers grew uneasy with this as the natural sciences gained prominence. The rise of the natural sciences is a gradual and uneven process that has its roots in the *Scientific Revolution* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As the Scientific Revolution developed, people were fascinated by the rapid growth of knowledge it brought. Behind these discoveries was a method that emphasizes observation, experimentation, measurement, and results. And science’s success raised a question for philosophers: If we apply a more scientific approach to ethics, would we see a similar advance and precision in moral knowledge? **Utilitarianism** is an attempt to bring this scientific orientation to ethics, and it finds its first major advocate in *Jeremy Bentham* (1748–1832).

As you might guess, the name “utilitarianism” indicates that ethics should have utility (usefulness) for helping us achieve some goal. For this reason, utilitarianism is categorized as a form of **consequentialist** (or **teleological**) **ethics**, which argues that right and wrong is determined by the outcome, or consequence, of an action. From the beginning, then, we see how utilitarianism’s concern with results reflects a scientific mindset. However, we need to define the desired outcome. The consequence sought in moral action, Bentham says, is happiness. He spends little time defending this conclusion because

he believes it is obvious. We don’t have to muster up an attraction to happiness or, conversely, an aversion to misery. It is natural to desire happiness and to avoid pain. This is also true on a social level. We resist laws or rules that will cause community unhappiness and prefer those that bring contentment.

While this emphasis on happiness seems to take us back toward Aristotle’s philosophy, Bentham’s theory has some important differences. While Aristotle distinguishes between pleasure and happiness, Bentham uses them interchangeably. For him, that which promotes pleasure is good; that which brings pain is bad. In addition, Bentham’s notion of happiness has a more democratic element to it. He believes that pleasure is good, regardless of whose pleasure it is. Thus, utilitarianism argues that ethics’ goal is not just my individual happiness. Because moral choices are not made in a social vacuum, they have the potential to bring happiness or pain to others, and this needs to be factored into our decisions. Thus, actions are good to the extent that they generate “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” (often referred to as the **greatest happiness principle**).

Because happiness functions as a motivation for action, as a measure of goodness, and as the outcome we seek in our behaviors, utilitarianism is sometimes described as **ethical hedonism**. We need to carefully define hedonism since it usually refers to “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll” pleasures in popular usage. For utilitarianism, the word has a broader meaning that refers to all types of pleasure, including psychological and social happiness. Moreover, as we have seen above, this is not an egoistic form of hedonism but one that requires consideration of others’ happiness as well. While Bentham devotes little effort to justifying why happiness is the standard of goodness, he spends a bit more time explaining how we should measure happiness. In fact, he devised a tool, the “hedonistic calculus,” to fine-tune our decisions about happiness and to nudge ethical decisions in the direction of the scientific method.

In his hedonistic calculus, Bentham points out that every situation offers a number of alternative actions. For example, Saturday is coming and we need to determine whether we will head for the beach, take a five-hour nap, or study for our physiology midterm. To decide

which action is the best moral option, hedonistic calculus employs seven “happiness” categories to ensure that we account for every facet of happiness. *Nearness* recognizes that some pleasant results occur soon after our decision; others emerge only later. Some forms of happiness have greater *durability* and are preferable to those that don’t last as long. We should also assign higher value to potential outcomes that have greater *certainty* for producing a happy result as well as those that promise a greater *intensity* of felicity. Pleasures sometimes involve an element of pain, such as a sacrifice of time or money. Thus, we should choose those with greater *purity* by factoring in the amount of pain required to gain a pleasure. Some types of happiness are what they are, but others result in additional positive outcomes or by-products. A trip to the beach, for example, may be fun in itself, but it can also bring pleasure down the line in greater cohesiveness with those who shared the trip. Bentham calls this potential for future happiness *fecundity*. Finally, in conformity with the greatest happiness principle, we need to consider the *number of people affected* in our moral calculations. The idea is to assign a value to each category (thus, this approach is often referred to as *quantitative utilitarianism*) to determine which option offers the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number.

Using hedonistic calculus seems like a lot of work, but Bentham argues that we often ask ourselves the same questions when we make big choices. How much will it cost? Am I certain that this will turn out as I plan? Is it likely to lead to further opportunities for happiness? How will my choice better or worsen the circumstances of my family and friends? Moreover, Bentham says, we consider these factors when making moral decisions on a corporate level. A government choice about zoning laws has ethical relevance because it restricts free use of property. To make this decision, we ask how the pain imposed by these restrictions balances against the happiness that might result from this law, whether plans for limiting uses of the property will actually result in a greater good, and other questions that mirror the elements of the hedonistic calculus. In short, Bentham argues that we instinctively use something like the hedonistic calculus in both personal and political decisions.

Bentham’s quantitative approach has an appeal because it implies that moral quandaries can be resolved by entering numbers in a hedonistic calculus iPhone app and choosing the option with the highest score. However, a later utilitarian, *John Stuart Mill* (1806–1873), was less convinced that the quantity of happiness was the most important moral consideration. Instead, he adopts *qualitative utilitarianism*, in which “greatest” in the greatest happiness principle refers to the *quality* of pleasure, not how much we receive. For example, I may get the same quantity of happiness from eating a big pile of nachos or reading a thought-provoking book. Does that mean that both activities have equal moral value? Mill would say no. Pigs might also receive a lot of pleasure from a plate of nachos but would be incapable of reading the book (unless it was written in Pig Latin?). Despite the fact that humans and pigs derive happiness from nachos, no sane human wants to be a pig. Mill believes this is evidence that intellectual happiness is intrinsically higher and better than pleasures that appeal only to the senses. In fact, having intellectual capacities provides such a qualitatively superior element to life that, as Mill puts it, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their side of the question.”

When we shift from comparing humans to pigs and move to the comparison between Socrates and the fool, Mill argues that knowing only one “side of the question” adds an important ethical consideration. “The fool,” for Mill, denotes a person who has experienced sensory pleasures but is unfamiliar with the types of pleasures important to those who value the intellect (e.g., Socrates). Since Socrates knows both sensory and intellectual pleasures, Socrates is more competent to judge which pleasure is superior. By contrast, ignorance of the higher pleasures causes the fool to crave nachos and shiny objects and dismiss intellectual pursuits as a waste of time.

Utilitarianism is a versatile ethical approach. Because the greatest happiness principle gives equal weight to the happiness of each individual, utilitarianism provides a way to bridge ethics and democratic political and social thought. In reality, it is the *de facto* method by which many political questions are decided. Also, while some

utilitarians are secular, this ethics is adaptable to religious thought. For example, Mill argues that it would be absurd for God to create a world in which moral action results in unhappiness. Instead, a moral God would design life so that happiness is the consequence of goodness. We have also seen that utilitarianism's flexibility allows for the quantitative approach suggested by Bentham as well as Mill's emphasis on the qualitative aspects of happiness.

More recently, utilitarian thought has shown its adaptability in a modification called *rule utilitarianism*, which addresses what some see as a significant problem in earlier versions of this theory. Bentham and Mill are representative of *act utilitarianism*, which says that the *act* that results in the greatest happiness for the greatest number is our moral obligation. However, the "Case of Sam" is a famous thought experiment that exposes a disturbing implication of act utilitarianism. In this case, Sam goes to the hospital to visit his only relative, a senile and ailing aunt. While he is there, the hospital experiences five emergency cases in which greatly loved and significant individuals need life-saving organ transplants. Under act utilitarianism, it seems perfectly permissible, maybe even morally obligatory, to anesthetize Sam, harvest his organs, and save the lives of five people. This act would certainly result in the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Still, most would find this outcome to be grossly immoral and unjust to Sam, even if no one will really miss him. Rule utilitarianism attempts to address this problem by arguing that an action is morally good if it follows a rule that brings about maximal happiness for the greatest number. A rule like "we should kill any available individual to save the lives of the many" would cause a large number of people to be extremely unhappy. After all, we might be the next potential organ donor most immediately at hand. Thus, rule utilitarianism, it would seem, would make it immoral to ambush Sam and take his organs.

KANT: ETHICS WITHOUT EXCEPTIONS

Many people are attracted to utilitarian ethics because it seems right that happiness and goodness are related to each other. Its conviction that happiness reaches beyond our individual interests to consider the good of the many also strikes a positive note, and we gravitate toward

approaches that factor in the consequences of actions. Despite those features, *Immanuel Kant* (1724–1804) considered utilitarianism one of the worst ideas in the entire constellation of ethical theories.

One of Kant's criticisms is that consequentialist approaches start their evaluations from the wrong end of the moral equation. Instead of determining goodness from an outcome, as utilitarianism does, we should begin instead from the front end by judging the motives from which one acts. Kant notes that it is possible for individuals to perform the same action from vastly different motives. For example, three people may put themselves in danger's way to help a person in need. One does it in hopes of public recognition and a big payoff in movie rights when Hollywood gets hold of the story; another does it from deep conviction about the value of human life; and the third is motivated by his grandfather's deep hatred of a cowardly comrade who abandoned him in the heat of battle. If we evaluate this situation based on consequences alone, as utilitarianism does, we have to conclude that each person was equally moral in their behavior. However, most probably do not find all three motives to be equally praiseworthy, and we generally do not evaluate moral decisions on outcomes alone. We think intentions—the motivation behind the action—are also important.

Kant also notes that consequentialism's focus on results makes our moral status dependent on something we can't always control or accurately predict. The person who was saved from the dangerous situation could detonate a nuclear explosion the following day that kills a million people in Chicago. Because this ultimate outcome caused great unhappiness for many people, does this mean it was immoral to save this person yesterday? Things sometimes turn out very different from what we imagined or planned. In contrast, we can control our motives. Thus, Kant's moral philosophy starts from the intuition that intentions are the crucial measure of goodness.

While Kant reserves his fiercest criticism for utilitarianism, he also has concerns about virtue ethics. The latter tells us that we should develop virtues such as self-discipline, generosity, and courage. This sounds like a good moral recipe until we consider the potential results of combining these virtues with an evil will. We can end up

with people disciplined in their drug-smuggling strategies, generous in providing resources for terrorists, or courageous enough to spout racist statements despite negative public responses. Kant agrees that the dispositions we usually call virtues are good, but only when they are coupled with a good will. A good will is the catalyst that makes all other things good. Thus, Kant states that a good will is the only thing that is good in itself.

The criteria for what makes a good will good, Kant says, are that one must act freely and in a manner consistent with rational moral principles. In order to act freely, an individual must function from internal motivations, not external fears or commands. He calls this *autonomy*, which literally means that each individual is one's own lawgiver. No external individual or group should hold moral authority or control over the actions of another. As long as we fulfill the second condition of deriving rational moral principles, we have final authority over the rules by which we live. Moral rules or principles are central to Kant's ethics because they direct us toward the actions we ought to engage in. Thus, his theory is a form of **deontological ethics** (from the Greek *deon*, meaning "duty") because Kant argues that the moral status of actions is determined by obedience to moral principles. Another term used for deontological ethics is **nonconsequentialism**, since it is based on objective rules rather than possible results (as in utilitarianism). However, Kant warns that we need to distinguish between two types of rational rules. The first is what he refers to as a **hypothetical imperative**. "If you want to get to Singapore from North America in less than twenty-four hours, you ought to take a plane" is a rational rule. You *ought* to do what this statement commands, but only *if* you want to get to Singapore in less than twenty-four hours. That little "if" makes a big difference, because the rule applies only on the condition that you want to get to Singapore in a certain time period. But if you do not want to go to Singapore quickly, or at all, the rule is not an imperative (command) for you.

Moral obligations are different. They are not conditioned by "if" because ethical duties are not dependent on what we want. Kant calls these universal moral rules **categorical imperatives**; they are principles that apply to everyone, with *no exceptions* (the definition of

"categorical"). He gives us several formulations for identifying these absolute moral rules (and confuses matters by also calling these "categorical imperatives"), but we will look at only two. The first formulation of the categorical imperative, what we will call CI¹, says, "Act only on that maxim (i.e., a rule that governs action) through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." If I am tempted to disentangle myself from a tough situation by lying, CI¹ says that I can only do so if I also agree that lying should become a universal law, meaning that everyone will always lie. Kant says that universal adoption of the rule "Everyone should always lie" results in logical absurdity because lying is parasitic on the truth. Deception requires that the other person believe you. But no one would believe any claim from anyone if everyone always lied. Thus it is irrational, and therefore always immoral, to lie.

The second formulation of the categorical imperative, what we will call CI², says, "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end." A more succinct way of stating this is that we should not use people for selfish purposes. If I am kind to someone because I anticipate that person will be useful for attaining a future promotion, I have violated CI². My concern was not my coworker's good. I used him to reach my own goal. The logic behind CI² is that others are, like us, moral agents. They have value because they are capable of thinking ethically. Thus we cannot give preference to our goals above theirs.

What would happen if we combined CI¹ and CI² and constructed society on these principles? This hypothetical world is Kant's **kingdom of ends**. His kingdom is a union of rational moral agents who freely agree to be subject to rational moral principles (CI¹). Each person is autonomous and sovereign in making these principles since reason alone dictates the actions of each citizen, but each is also subject to these principles. In following these moral imperatives, fellow citizens, since they are moral agents, must always be treated as ends and never used as a means (CI²) to achieve one's own selfish ambitions.

To some, Kant's kingdom of ends sounds like the kingdom of heaven on earth. Occupying a world where people live according

to rules like “don’t kill,” “don’t steal,” “abide by your promises”—all principles Kant considered categorical imperatives—sounds pretty nice. And Kant says that the parallels between his kingdom of ends and a heavenly kingdom are not accidental. However, two questions pop up with this vision of a moral society. First, it seems problematic because even when we have rational knowledge of what we ought to do, we don’t always want to do it. Kant concurs with this concern. Although he has great confidence in reason’s ability to discern the good, he is much more skeptical about our will’s desire to do the good. Experience tells us that we are all capable of acting irrationally because the will is infected by radical evil. Thus, Kant says that while the kingdom of ends gives us a vision of the moral ideal, the ethical life is a struggle.

A second question is why, if Kant considers his kingdom of ends to be a reflection of a heavenly situation, he doesn’t bring God into his discussion of ethics. Part of this answer takes us back to his principle of autonomy. While he believes that God is the ultimate source of knowledge, reason frees us from the whims of those who may claim to speak for God. If used correctly, reason is a sufficient source for moral knowledge. However, Kant does bring God into the picture at the conclusion of his moral considerations. While goodness does not necessarily bring happiness in this life, those who do good deserve happiness. If ethical people died without receiving happiness and this was the end of the story, our moral impulse would be irrational. Thus, Kant believes in the existence of an all-knowing God who discerns our intentions and, in the afterlife, rewards those who obey the categorical imperatives.

DIVINE COMMAND THEORY: GOD SAID IT, 'NUF SAID

Some who are dissatisfied with Kant’s answers about God’s role in ethics and the problem of a fallen will gravitate toward **divine command theory**. While Kant eventually gets around to talking about God’s relationship to ethics, it only comes into play after all the important work on ethics is done. Divine command theorists find this puzzling. They share Kant’s deontological approach but argue that

objective moral rules need to be anchored in some ultimate reality like God. Rather than bringing in God at the end to guarantee that good is rewarded, shouldn’t God be there from the very beginning of ethics as rule maker? Moreover, while Kant strives to construct ethics on reason, it seems risky to invest so much confidence in a human capacity that is finite and, like everything else in our humanity, infected by sin. In other words, divine command theory agrees with Kant that the fallen will desires evil, but questions whether reason itself is capable of truly knowing the good.

Although the best-known advocates of divine command theory come from the Christian tradition, this approach predates Christianity. Moreover, this theory finds adherents in a number of different religions, who likewise ground moral knowledge in **divine law**. On one level, divine command theory is a fairly straightforward approach to ethics. It begins with the idea that ethics is based on laws, which have legitimacy only if backed by a rightful authority. God is the ultimate authority and therefore is justified in issuing moral commands. If all this is true, our task is to obey commands that come from God. Thus the basic form of divine command theory is that if God tells us to do something, it is wrong for us not to do that something.

In contrast to other theories in this chapter, divine command often adds another element. Most philosophers construct ethical theories on the basis of reason. This makes reason the ultimate authority, or at least the most reliable route to authority. However, a little modesty and some historical knowledge remind us that what seems “reasonable” changes over time and varies across cultures. People used to think that ownership of slaves was supported by reason, so should we bet that we now have truly rational beliefs about the ethics of slavery? Moreover, if God provides a moral guidebook, would that not be a more direct and reliable source for ethics? These questions lead some divine command advocates to conclude that the moral teachings of Scripture are more trustworthy than grounding ethics in reason. If I want to know my moral duty in a specific situation, I should search the Bible for guidance and act according to its commands.

Divine command theory adherents also argue that this model makes sense on another level. Not only do reason-based ethical

systems differ from each other, but they also miss the real point of ethics. At the most basic level, ethics is about living morally, not amassing knowledge about ethics. You might get an A in an upper-division ethical theory class, but if you swindle your sister out of an inheritance, most people will consider you unethical. Thus divine command theory gets us to the heart of ethics. The point isn't to figure out what makes goodness good but to obey good commands. In short, divine command theory moves the emphasis away from reason and focuses on the will.

As you might imagine, many philosophers (both Christian and secular) have concerns about giving will priority over reason. Some point to the fact that different religions have different commands from different gods. Without reason to make discernments, we are left with a tangled and contradictory web of competing divine commands. Others object because divine command theory implies that one cannot have moral knowledge unless one believes in God. However, the most enduring criticism of divine command theory goes all the way back to Socrates' *Euthyphro* dilemma.

In the dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks Euthyphro about the relationship between piety and the gods: Is the holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is something holy because the gods love it? When we modify this question so that it reads, "Is the good loved by God because it is good, or is something good because God loves it?" we have a starting place to think through the relationship between God and goodness.

The first option (God loves the good because it is good) does not fit well with divine command theory because it makes goodness independent from God. Goodness exists and God loves it. If that is true, God would commit evil if God gave commands contrary to the good, which limits divine omnipotence and sovereignty. It also implies that good would exist even if God did not, which seems inconsistent with the belief that nothing exists apart from God. Therefore, divine command theorists generally go with the second option and state that something is good because God loves it. However, if goodness is based solely on God's will or love, goodness seems to be completely arbitrary. Could God command that nailing kittens

to walls is a moral duty? We might say that God wouldn't make such a decree. But this statement takes us back to the first position. If we say that God *should not* decree that nailing kittens to walls is good, we imply that moral standards exist independently of God. If we say that God *could not* decree that nailing kittens to walls is good, we imply that God's sovereignty is limited. This is the dilemma: divine command theorists do not want to say that goodness is independent of God, but it also seems repugnant to entertain the possibility that God could arbitrarily command that torturing small furry felines is the apex of moral excellence. Where does divine command theory go from here?

One way to handle this dilemma comes from the medieval philosopher *William of Occam* (1287–1347). His brand of divine command seeks to preserve absolute divine sovereignty, so he argues that it is within God's power even to command hatred toward God as a moral obligation. In his approach, the utter sovereignty of God stands in contrast with the limitation and fallen-ness of human reason. To question God's will on the basis of what seems reasonable to us is a failure to properly recognize God's transcendence and our finitude.

More recent divine command theorists believe that there is another way to untangle the *Euthyphro* dilemma. *Robert Merrihew Adams* (1937–), for example, offers what he calls the *modified divine command theory*. Adams argues that when Christians talk about God, they do not picture a sovereign being devoid of all other characteristics. Instead, they envision a God whose most fundamental quality is love. Although humans issue commands that do not perfectly reflect our nature, this is not the case for God. God's nature and commands exist in perfect unison, and divine commands are therefore unfailingly conditioned by God's love. Thus Adams' modified divine command theory says that actions are ethically wrong if they are "contrary to the commands of a loving God." The key factor for Adams is that God's loving nature logically precedes God's commands. He thus concludes that commands conditioned by divine love defeats the criticism that God's commands are arbitrary. So you can relax. A loving God won't command us to torture kittens.

NATURAL LAW: MORALITY CAN'T NOT BE KNOWN

Some segments of Christian culture downplay reliance on reason, and divine command theory often appeals to them because it bypasses reason and goes directly to the will. However, other Christians have concerns about this attitude toward rationality. In the more general sense, they observe that we rely on reason to guide us in discovering the best ways to build a house, encourage a robust bloom of flowers on a rosebush, fill a cavity, or repair a broken water line. Reason isn't infallible for these tasks, but it is the best tool we have; and even divine command advocates use reason for these activities. So why do they carve out ethics as the one place where reason is deemed unreliable? In addition, we might wonder why every culture in every age already seems to know many of the moral commands contained in the Bible. Societies throughout history have taught that lying, violating marriage covenants, and assaulting innocent people are **moral evils**. How did they know this if they had never heard of the Ten Commandments and have never seen a Bible? **Natural law ethics** is, like divine command theory, a deontological approach to ethics. Unlike divine command theory, however, natural law does not pit reason against divine revelation. Instead, it views reason as a means by which all can discover God's moral will.

Aristotle's belief that all things have a purpose (or *telos*) has a strong influence on natural law ethics. In fact, a teleological orientation is baked into the label "natural law," as long as we recognize that "nature" in natural law does not refer to inert and meaningless matter. Instead, "nature" refers to a God-given ideal. This grows out of the conviction that God creates with intent and invests all things with a purpose. Thus, everything in the cosmos achieves its nature when it operates as God intends.

Thomas Aquinas is a Christian natural law philosopher who argues that we should think of God not just as the creator of all things but also as the governor of all. The adage says that a good story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The Christian story begins with creation and aims toward a God-given *telos* at the conclusion, but

God is also active in the middle of the story as governor; and the way God's governance is evident to us is in law. Just as it was important to carefully define "nature" in natural law, it is also critical that we clarify what Aquinas means by "law." For Aquinas, a law has four important characteristics: it is rational, it exists to serve the common good, it fulfills a need of a community, and it is promulgated (or communicated). We will come back to these four characteristics shortly, but a brief glance at these four characteristics explains why Aquinas views law as an indicator of God's grace. God's laws are rational rather than arbitrary, they provide for our needs and bind us together in harmony, and we know what the expectations are. In other words, God governs by laws so that, if we follow them, we will advance toward our ideal (i.e., nature).

Humans are moral, social/political, and spiritual beings. Therefore, God has ordained different types of laws that allow all these dimensions of human life to function according to the divine plan. Since ethics is our main focus in this chapter, we will start with natural law, which reveals God's will for the moral dimension of human existence. Like all laws, natural law must be communicated, or "promulgated," since laws can't guide us if we don't know what they are. Aquinas says that God promulgates his moral law to us through reason. Because humans possess rational ability, all people can know what God expects from us morally. In fact, Aquinas goes even farther by stating that it is impossible not to know God's moral will, at least in its most basic demands. In addition, God's moral law is a reflection of God's moral character. Understanding natural law, then, doesn't just tell us what we ought to do; it reveals something about God. Thus, God promulgates natural law by means of **general revelation**, knowledge of God's nature and moral will (revelation) that is available to all rational people (general). General revelation doesn't tell us everything we want to know or need to know about God, but what it does reveal is true and valuable.

The simple answer to the question of how reason is capable of learning ethical knowledge is experience. We are social beings who live with and rely on others. We learn over time that relationships break down when people lie to each other. The trust that community

life requires is violated when one person steals what rightfully belongs to another. Thus if we want to function well in our family and community relations, reason leads us to conclude that it is irrational (and thus morally wrong) to lie and steal. God hard wires us to learn morality.

Primary laws (or precepts) are at the foundation of natural law. These laws are fundamental and objective moral rules like “do good” or “act justly.” Primary precepts are axiomatic in the sense that one cannot argue against them without falling into contradiction. To argue that rules like “do good” or “act justly” are not objectively true assumes that taking them as such would cause harm or be unjust, which is self-contradictory. Thus Aquinas concludes it is impossible not to know basic moral truths. **Secondary laws (or precepts)** are more specific rules that apply to a situation at hand, such as “keep promises” or “don’t steal.” These are also objective moral standards that outline our moral duties, but they are secondary for two reasons. First, no single secondary law applies to every situation. “Don’t commit murder” outlines moral duties governing our respect for the lives of others but doesn’t offer guidance about whether I should drive away in a Porsche that doesn’t belong to me. Also, the duties imposed by secondary laws are not absolute if they conflict with primary laws. I do not violate natural law if I steal a friend’s gun and renege on a promise to drive him to his mother’s house if I know he is enraged and has threatened to kill her. In this situation, stealing and breaking a promise are justified because doing so fulfills the primary precepts of acting justly and doing good. Therefore, even though we all have knowledge of basic moral laws, we still have to use discernment in how we apply them to specific situations.

Natural law is the means by which we seek God’s ideal for the moral dimension of life. However, we are also social/political, and God gives **human law (or positive law)** to govern this facet of life. Human law refers to laws that we find in virtually every society, such as those prohibiting bribery, murder, fraud, and vandalism. Like natural law, human law is known by general revelation. Even rulers who reject God are still rational beings and thus recognize the types of ordinances and laws that facilitate social peace and harmony. Because moral good is closely related to social good, positive law overlaps

with natural law; but there is a difference. Human law can only mandate rules governing action, while moral law also governs attitudes. Although sexual lust is immoral according to natural law, one cannot be punished under human law for lust unless it leads to illegal sexual activity. God’s purpose in human law is to provide order and security for a nation’s citizens and to create a social context in which those who desire to live morally can do so.

Finally, human beings have a spiritual dimension granted by a God who graciously wants us to find salvation. God’s guidance toward this telos comes through divine law, which is promulgated through Scripture and church tradition. Through divine law we come to know, for example, that Jesus’ death atones for our sins and that God exists as Trinity. This is what Aquinas calls **special revelation**. It reveals something about God’s will and character that reason could not discover by its natural powers. Instead, we believe it by faith. While unaided reason cannot tell us, for example, that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, this does not mean that what we know through special revelation is irrational or that faith and reason conflict. Special revelation transcends the powers of natural reason and the scope of general revelation, but the two types of revelation cannot contradict each other because both originate in the same God.

Advocates of natural law are attracted to this theory for several reasons. First, the various types of laws acknowledge the different dimensions of human existence. We are indeed spiritual beings, but we also live in cities that have unique building codes and traffic laws with fellow citizens who have ethical questions about how much the government or Google should know about us. Each of these aspects of life—spiritual, social, and moral—is important to us, and God’s laws are a reminder that God also cares about and is involved with every aspect of our existence. Natural law also offers a broad view of God’s grace. Through general revelation God allows political leaders to know how to restrain evil, even if they don’t always obey this knowledge, and God assists individuals in discerning the moral rules that direct us toward goodness. Finally, Aquinas argues that these different laws are linked, in that human law in a good society points discerning individuals toward the higher goal of moral excellence,

and moral discernment directed by natural law points toward the need for salvation revealed in divine law. It also reminds us that, even though ethical behavior is not sufficient for salvation, those who enjoy the fruits of salvation through divine law should strive to be moral (natural law) and good citizens (positive law).

CONCLUSION

Although the previous paragraph lists features that some consider compelling support for natural law, other philosophers in this chapter will think Aquinas' theory is flawed. Nietzsche would argue that the will to power, not reason, shapes life and should guide our ethics. The divine command folks agree with Nietzsche's emphasis on will's role in ethics but disagree vehemently with Nietzsche's notion that the will should serve egoistic purposes. Here, divine command theorists will be closer to Aquinas in the belief that God is the ultimate foundation of ethics. However, Kant objects to their attempts to ground ethics in an external authority, arguing that one's rationality is the proper foundation of moral autonomy. Aristotle, even though he is a big fan of reason, rejects Kant's deontological approach because it encourages rule following and tends to ignore the inward dispositional change needed for virtue development. Finally, the utilitarians want to ask everyone else, "Isn't anyone but us interested in the outcomes of our choices?"

The upshot of the summary above is that when our investigation of the moral life looks behind social expectations, cultural standards, and family upbringing, we find an ongoing and vigorous discussion that draws us into other philosophical topics. Answers to questions about how we know what is real, the purpose of life, and the structure of human nature will shape our ethical ideas. Perhaps more than any other area, though, political philosophy has a close kinship with ethics since both share concerns about justice. We now move from conversations about living the moral life to theories about how we should create moral structures for society.