

COMMENTARY ON ETHICS AND ETHICAL THEORY

Professor Bruce V. Foltz

1. OCCASIONS FOR ETHICS

Perhaps the most common misconception about ethics—and this holds good for both theoretical ethics, as well as the everyday ethics by which we live—is that it is a chaotic arena of hopeless disagreement and endless bickering about irresolvable problems. It is what causes many people to regard themselves as ethical skeptics, i.e. as people who believe that there is no such thing as ethical knowledge. But happily, it takes only a little reflection to see that this belief is patently erroneous. Most of us live much of our lives without engaging in ethical deliberation at all, and this is simply due to the enormous degree of consensus and the impressive stability that characterize our moral landscape.¹ That is, for the most part there is little day-to-day disagreement about right and wrong. For example, decent people do not deliberate about murder or rape or arson or grand larceny or treason or a host of other moral offenses that we do not, and need not, question in our everyday life—and this consensus concerns not only such grave matters as those just listed, but less monumental concerns as well. We agree, for example, that apart from exceptional circumstances:

- We ought be polite to one another.
- We ought to be truthful to one another.
- It is wrong to betray a friend.
- We should respond to generosity with gratitude

¹ Whereas it is commonly believed that there is some distinction between the terms “ethical” and “moral,” in philosophy they are synonyms, their most important difference being that the former is derived from the Greek and the latter from the Latin.

And there are a host of other moral beliefs that we easily share and do not ordinarily debate, even while we acknowledge that there are sometimes exceptions. (We are not expected to be polite, for example, while pushing someone out of the way of a speeding vehicle.) More interesting yet, these are not local or regional, but universal expectations. Even though a person may sometimes speak in an unguarded moment of some group of people as being rude, or mendacious, or ungrateful, we usually understand this to mean that the culture in question simply has a different sense of what it means to be truthful or loyal or generous—and if we begin to suspect that the criticism is being meant literally, we immediately begin to suspect bigotry on the part of the speaker. Beyond this, until the late eighteenth century, there was a strong consensus within ethical theory as well concerning which kinds of actions were moral and which were immoral.²

Philosophers have traditionally spent little or no time debating *which* actions were right and wrong. There are good reasons, then, to believe that this shared territory of moral standards is, as argued in C. S. Lewis’ appendix to *The Abolition of Man*³, universal to humanity, our common homeland.

But there are, of course, genuine ethical perplexities too, and it is due to these

² Beginning in the eighteenth century, there are philosophers and intellectuals who are willing to call traditional standards of moral behavior into question. The Marquis de Sade, the Russian anarchist Bakunin, Marx’s claim that traditional morality was merely a bourgeois ethos, Nietzsche ethic of the “higher man,” and the many challenges to traditional moral sensibilities raised by Peter Singer (of whom more later) represent a few examples.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001).

dilemmas that we might hastily assume there is no such thing as ethical knowledge. It is also due to these that there is a need for philosophical ethics: both *normative ethics* (the deliberation over what is right and wrong with the intent of establishing rational standards) and *meta-ethics* (the examination, often comparative, of the underlying principles employed in normative ethics), the two together making up what we may call *ethical theory*. These dilemmas that serve as real-life occasions for philosophical study and reflection do not, however, arise haphazardly but in predictable patterns, almost always falling into one or more of four categories:

1. One of the greatest sources of moral befuddlement today is the accelerating rate of *technological change*. A simple example is the lack of ethical consensus concerning the times, places, and manners it is appropriate to speak on cell phones, a deficiency that reflects the newness of the technology itself. More complex examples involve the enormously vexing ethical issues that have arisen due to new reproductive technologies; these range from perplexities regarding extramarital sex to abortion to human bioengineering and cloning. At least a major part of our confusion in these areas comes from the newness of the relevant technologies, but there is reason to hope (based on historical experience) that reasonable answers will eventually be established, once we have time to assimilate and reflect on them. (But of course, there is always the unsettling possibility that technological change will maintain such a pace that our moral sensibilities will never catch up.)

2. A second source is *cultural conflict*, sometimes arising from new immigration patterns, and sometimes from conflicting moral visions between social classes. It is not accidental that perhaps the greatest work of ethical thought, Plato's *Republic*, is

dramatically situated at the Piraeus, the cosmopolitan port of Athens where people from many cultures and classes were to be found. Such puzzles, then, are perennial, and one can hope that the challenges they provide will offer an ongoing source of balance and learning within, and between, existing cultures.

3. There are, in addition, many times when internal criticism reveals *moral blind spots* and failings within a given culture. We can think here of the gladiator spectacles of ancient Rome, of the prevalence of slavery in many places prior to the nineteenth century, or of the cruel treatment of animals that is only recently being exposed as morally repugnant. Typically, there are raging debates when such practices are first criticized, followed by a gradually evolving consensus. For example, the debate over slavery, which inflamed our own country and led to a bloody civil war, is hardly a live issue today, even though at the time it seemed questionable that it would ever be resolved. The success of such resolutions, then, can be a source of optimism that moral progress is not only possible, but is an important feature of the ethical world.

4. A final source of ethical perplexity is less obvious than the first three, but perhaps ultimately more important. For lack of a better term, we will call it an *existential* source. It is illustrated in Plato's dialogue, *The Republic*, by the two young brothers (Glaucón and Adimantus) offering a challenge to Socrates: what reason, they ask him, is there for us to want in the first place to be "just" or "good," that is, to live an ethical life? The boys report what they have heard far too many times at home and in the marketplace—that it is indeed important to avoid wrongdoing, but only in order to avoid the likelihood of punishment and to maintain a good reputation. And they wonder if this is enough. Is someone who refrains from

stealing only from fear of punishment really a “good person”? Is someone who tells the truth only to maintain a good reputation really an honest person? Even worse, they ask, wouldn’t this everyday view mean that if it is possible to engage in wrongdoing secretly, avoiding both external punishment and damaged reputation, then this moral impunity would be the “best of both worlds”—the good reputation and the ill-gotten gains as well—and thus seeming to be good would be even “better” than actually being good?

This source of ethical perplexity, then, concerns not so much which actions are good and bad as the motives, the reasons, for trying to live a good life in the first place: how and why it is important to live morally. This is a question that each of us must answer for himself/herself, no matter what society they live in. And it is, moreover, the most important question for ethical theory: what are the ultimate grounds for pursuing the moral life?

2. NATURALISTIC ETHICS

Why be moral at all? Surely this is not only the deepest and most individual question of ethics, but the preeminent question as well. For if we don’t have a good reason as to why we should be good, then there is hardly much point in deliberating about how goodness itself might be defined. Socrates’ answer to Glaucon and Adiemantus challenging question occupies the whole of *The Republic*, where he develops at length a compelling argument that goodness is indeed important, quite apart from punishment and rewards and reputation, because wrongdoing necessarily violates the natural functioning of the soul—a bit like running diesel fuel (or perhaps better yet, Coca Cola) in a gasoline engine—and thus it damages the wrongdoer even more than it

might injure a person who might be wronged. So Socrates develops a very rich understanding of the human soul, of its nature and of its healthy functioning—and shows along the way that the soul is by its very nature immortal, implying that damage to the soul (of the wrongdoer) is much worse (eternally worse) than any damage done to the body (of the person wronged), which is relatively short-term, since the human body is mortal.

Plato here, through his character Socrates in the dialogue, elaborates a classical model of ethic theory. He shows no interest in deliberating whether people should lie or steal or murder. This is in large part because everyone agrees—just as much in fifth century Athens, as they would today—that such things simply should not be done. But the important question is *why* they shouldn’t be done. And he gives this question a classical answer by means of an understanding of human nature, combined with an understanding of the nature of the world itself. This kind of moral theory, then, we can call *naturalistic ethics*. It is by far the most common mode of ethical thinking, characterizing the moral understanding of virtually all peoples everywhere prior to the nineteenth century in Western Europe and its spheres of influence.

For example early Buddhism, which has at its heart an ethical theory, sees *human nature* as prone to grasping, clinging, and generally trying to hold on to things. On the other hand, it sees the *nature of reality* as being characterized by flux and process and radical impermanence, a feature that inflicts endless disappointment and frustration on those who would grasp after stability. The ethical prescriptions, then, are oriented towards *virtues* that would help remedy this tendency of *human nature* in order to bring it into harmony with the *nature of the world*. Similarly, the ancient Greek Stoics see the

natural inclination to human ambition as destructive and—in view of the fact that the nature of things unfolds according to the will of the gods, not human wishes—as being arrogant and proud, and thus they prescribe above all the virtue of resignation to fate. Or, in contrast, we may look at the highly influential ethical theory of Aristotle, in which human nature is seen as inherently oriented toward self-actualization, and the virtues he prescribes are those (such as fortitude and self-control) that serve to aid this natural tendency. Yet a careful look at the nature of the world and events leads Aristotle to acknowledge the uncertainty of human affairs, and to prescribe above all the virtue of contemplation, which rises above many of the vicissitudes of fate. Even the ancient Epicureans, who saw human nature as oriented toward pleasure—making their theory a form of ethical *hedonism*—saw clearly that the nature of reality was such as to reward debauched pleasure rather harshly, leading them (together with the Buddhists, the Stoics, and the Aristotelians) to prescribe as highest the detached virtue of contemplation, and to strongly discourage (some will be disappointed to hear) participation in orgies. All of these different ethical theories, then, while offering different perspectives of human nature and the nature of the real, converge on many points as well, and prescribe many of the same virtues. The adherents of any of these, while noting differences of emphasis, would be quite at home in the moral landscape of all the others, for all strive to do the same thing: to bring human nature into harmony with nature itself by prescribing certain virtues meant to bring about this harmony. While clearly displaying divergences, canons of virtue in all the world's great ethical and religious traditions exhibit large degrees of overlap.

Yet the way in which the Christian moral vision, which has without doubt been

the most influential in the West, diverges from these other ethical traditions is quite striking. Bringing together Athens and Jerusalem, the transcendent religious vision it has inherited from Judaism with the immanent sense of human affairs coming from the ancient Greeks and Romans, Christianity sees human nature as created in the image of God, and maintains that the man Jesus not only fully manifests that image, but eternally joins together humanity and divinity in the very nature of the Holy Trinity. Not surprisingly, this view of human nature opens up new moral horizons and generates new virtues. Aristotle, for example, had made friendship one of his key virtues, and defined it as having the right degree of “liking” for the right people in the right times and places, seeing it as just as much a vice to lower oneself by being friends with inferiors as it was to seek friendship with superiors. Christianity, in contrast, proclaimed not just friendship (*philia*) but even more importantly love (*agape*), which it understood as affirming and caring for *all* people in the same unlimited way that God does. And while Aristotelian justice was preoccupied with proportion—with repaying both benefit and harm in just the right amount, neither too much nor too little—the Christian vision of justice was something lavish and divine—repaying evil with good, and good with even greater good, just as does God, and thus transforming our status as intrinsic *images* of God into that of being actual *likenesses* of God. But if the demands were greater, so were the rewards, promising not just pleasure, or even mere happiness, but divine *joy*—and offering not just a contemplative *vision* of God as did Aristotle, but an actual *union* with the Godhead, a divinization (*theosis*) of the soul by means of divine grace! It is important to remember, however, that Christianity remained, in the sense defined here, a naturalistic ethics,

drawing upon understandings of human nature, of the nature of what is ultimately real, and of the virtues needed to bring them together.

3. THE RISE OF MODERN ETHICS

Naturalistic ethics had founded morality on “the nature of things” (*rerum natura*), on what was seen as the enduring, or indeed eternal essences that ordered the cosmos. In Christian teaching, these were understood as the divine ideas through which God created the heaven and earth. To live in harmony with them was thus, at the same time, to live in harmony with eternal truth, or—in the Christian rendering—with the eternal God. For the direct discernment of these principles, however, a special kind of knowledge was required: not discursive, calculative, inferential rationality, but what was regarded as a higher kind of rationality, an immediate apprehension of eternal truth, to be accomplished by the highest powers of the human mind. The Greeks called this highest faculty “*nous*,” while the Latins called it “*intellectus*.” (The greater part of Plato’s *Republic* is an exploration of what kind of education can be expected to produce this highest, noetic understanding.) Farther East, this kind of knowledge was seen as the business of sages—Lao Tzu, Confucius, Gautama Buddha—while in the pagan West it was sought after by philosophers in the inquiry known as “metaphysics.” Beginning with Christianity, the great mystical teachers of the Church—many of them monastics, spiritual athletes—pursued the contemplative life that led to the direct understanding of these highest truths. And another tradition can be seen running from Hesiod through Socrates all the way to Thoreau, and claiming that a virtuous and simple life, of the kind that can be lived by anyone, can itself lead to a grasp of the very nature of things. Indeed, Plato (in the

Phaedrus) maintains that all human beings have at least a dim understanding of these highest principles that order reality. The list of universal moral principles that Lewis gives at the end of *The Abolition of Man* suggest that surely all peoples in all times and places seem to have some kind of access to this type of understanding.

Starting in the late Middle Ages, however, there began to be a skepticism and even disavowal of claims to this kind of knowledge. The British monk, William of Ockham, taught that God created the world through sheer fiat of will, and claimed further that the belief in eternal principles or archetypes was impious, for it implied they somehow limited the divine sovereignty, setting bounds to what it was possible for God to will. (During the next century, another monk, Martin Luther, was strongly influenced by Ockham.) Thus, the revered terms used by metaphysicians to invoke eternal essences were nothing more than words, a view that came to be known as “nominalism” and that was known in scholastic circles as the *via moderna* (the way of the moderns), in contrast to the *via antiqua* (the way of the ancients, who had sought the knowledge of essences.) Here, indeed, we can locate the beginning of modernity. If there are no essences or natures, then the claim to a higher knowledge of them is empty. We must, instead, investigate on a case-by-case basis, making connections as we find them according to the faculty not of *intellectus*, but of *ratio*, instrumental or calculative rationality, which found its new lexicon in the formulas of mathematics. The rise of modern science in the ensuing centuries was merely the most visible outcome of this monumental revolution in Western thought.

But can this same kind of calculative, instrumental rationality that was being powerfully deployed in the knowledge of material reality, be sufficient for

understanding the moral universe? The history of modern ethics can be seen as a series of attempts to arrive at an affirmative answer to this question. Can discursive rationality by itself arrive at its own principles for the ethical sphere? Are there “formulas” that could serve us in understanding what is right and wrong, analogous to the formulas being used with such success in the physical sciences? If we cannot base ethics on the nature of things, neither the order of the universe nor human nature, can we base it solely on human rationality? We cannot expect to arrive at virtues, since these are traits of character meant to harmonize human nature with the underlying order of the cosmos, and the *via moderna* has disclaimed the knowledge of both.⁴ But can we at least arrive at some rational formula that will allow us to discern right actions from wrong actions?

Human action, since it takes place in time, has both a beginning and an end. The beginning is the *principle* upon which it is based, and the end is its *outcome*. Logically, then, a formula to govern action could be oriented either to the underlying principle or rationale (which when individualized is called its “maxim”) or else to the end or outcome. And these two logical possibilities define the two kinds of modern ethical theory: *deontology* (which concerns itself with ethical beginnings) and *utilitarianism* (which concerns itself with consequences.)

4. ETHICS OF DUTY AND PRINCIPLE: DEONTOLOGY

The term “deontology” (de-on-tall-o-gee) comes from the Greek work for

⁴ It may be objected that the new scientific understanding of “nature” can now itself serve as a basis for ethics. But this is something that science cannot in principle achieve, since it explicitly and systematically disavows the very teleological principles—the *teloi*, the purpose or meaning of things—that would provide a linkage to the ethical.

“duty” (*deontos*) and as this origin may suggest, this view of ethics maintains that an action is right if and only if it is done for the sake of duty—that is, done just because it is the right thing to do, not for the sake of the consequences that may or may not follow. Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth century German philosopher who was the founder of this school of ethics, argued that most of ethical theory prior to him had overlooked this all-important point. What we have called “naturalistic” ethics, Kant termed “eudaimonistic” (yew-dye-mon-iss-tik) ethics, since it seeks happiness (*eudaimonia*) through the exercise of virtue. But is it especially “moral,” Kant asked, to strive for happiness? Certainly there is nothing “wrong” with seeking happiness, but neither is it especially “good,” he argued. It is, rather, morally neutral. But what is specifically “good” in the moral sense is what we do, not *out of* self-interest—which the quest for happiness always serves—but rather what we do, *despite* our self-interest, just because it is the right thing for us to do, i.e. just because it is our duty. If, for example, I go to the aid of a drowning child because I know that the parents are rich and I can expect a reward, there is nothing particularly good about my action. Although I did the right thing, it is still merely self-serving because I did it for the sake of the cash, and not on the principle that this is the right thing to do. But if, on the other hand, I do not even know who the parents are, and moreover if I put myself at danger during the rescue, then it seems that I have done the right thing just because it *is* the right thing. I have, in other words, done it simply from a sense of my duty to do what is right, rather than from an interest in my own future happiness.

How, then, are we to gain the knowledge of what our duty might be at any given time. Kant offers as a formula what he calls the “categorical imperative”: an

imperative, because it commands us, tells us what we ought to do, and *categorical*, because it states that we should act on this principle categorically, all the time. The formal version of this formula reads as follows: *act only on that maxim that you could will to be a universal law*. The *maxim* (or underlying principle of our individual action, our “policy” as it were) of our action, should *only* be that which we could will *universally*, i.e. will to be carried out by all people in all times and places. Or to state it more concisely, I should only do that which I could “universalize”—want to be done universally. Can I will that I tell a lie when I find it convenient? Sure, a fine idea. Can I rationally will that everyone lie when they find it convenient? Of course not, since if everyone lied, there would be no such thing as truth, and without the expectation of truth, lies themselves (which masquerade as truth) would become impossible. Can I will that I steal whenever I want? Certainly. But can I will that everyone steal whenever they like? Once again, this is absurd, since if all were to steal at will, there would be no more property, and stealing itself would become impossible. Kant believed, then, that this one rational formula was sufficient to govern all moral behavior, and he believed that far from being esoteric or abstruse, it was known by every well-raised child.⁵ For after all, do we not challenge children from the earliest age with the question: what if *everyone* acted like that?

Surely Kant has arrived at a solid insight here. For after all, he is presenting here a philosophical version of the principle of fairness or evenhandedness—a virtue taught by all the world’s great philosophical and religious traditions. It is, indeed, wrong

⁵ Kant emphasizes that this formula is not based on human nature, but on sheer rationality alone. Hence it would serve as an imperative for *any* rational being—gods, angels, demons, or whatever—and not just for humans.

to act in ways that one would prohibit to others. But is this formula alone enough to map out the moral landscape? Is it *all* we need to know? And doesn’t this give us only a negative criterion, a standard for sorting out wrong actions (those that I can’t universalize) without giving me a positive vision of what I *should* be doing? Other questions arise. What about moral conflicts? What about the proverbial man who steals a loaf of bread to feed his starving family? The fact that the moral law is categorical means that it is always wrong to steal, no matter what. So I may not steal, even if this is the only means of saving others. Or: An innocent person seeks refuge at my door from a homicidal maniac. It is my duty to protect the innocent. The would-be murderer now appears, and demands to know if the victim is in my house. It is my duty to tell the truth. Which duty should I carry out? Surprisingly, Kant maintains that it is wrong to tell a lie, even to save the life of an innocent person. But surely this is absurd, and in philosophy, an absurd conclusion is an indication that the underlying principle is problematic, or at the very least inadequate.

Second, we may ask whether it really is, after all, only the motive or principle of action that makes an act good. Isn’t what is important whether or not the child gets saved from drowning, and not just the state of the rescuer’s soul? Conversely, are well intentioned, but inept and counter-productive actions really good—no matter how dutifully enacted, or how pure their moral principles? In short, isn’t it the consequences of an act that make it good or bad, and not the motives of the agent? Two nineteenth century philosophers—Jeremy Bentham, and later John Stuart Mill—believed that the goodness of an act does indeed reside in its consequences, and went on to become the key figures in utilitarian ethics. How, then, are the consequences to

be judged? Simply by assaying the net increase in pleasure and decrease in pain, argued Bentham. Indeed, Bentham went so far as to propose a hedonic calculus (from the Greek word for pleasure, *hedonê*) to reckon the goodness of an act.

5. ETHICS OF MAXIMIZING PLEASURE: UTILITARIANISM

Bentham's hedonic calculus works like this. Let's say that I am planning to spend a quiet evening reading poetry by the fireplace, when my little nephew Joey, who is spending the weekend with me, discovers that the circus is in town. Suppose a ten-point scale of pleasure and pain. If I stay home and read poetry, there will be a 3 point increase in my own pleasure (poetry is not the most intense of pleasures), but a crushing disappointment at missing the circus for Joey with an 8 point increment of pain, resulting in a net of *minus 5* on the pleasure-pain index ($3-8=-5$). If, on the other hand, we go to the circus, my own tempered, adult disappointment at missing the quiet evening (-2), irritation at the tackiness and raucousness of the circus (-3), and subdued pleasure at watching the high-wire walker in tights (+1), combines with the wild excitement of my nephew at getting to see the circus (+10) and gorge himself on cotton candy (+2), which nevertheless will upset his stomach (-3), resulting in a net of *plus 5* on the pleasure-pain index ($-2-3+1+10+2-3=5$). It is clear from balancing the alternate consequences—weighing my own pleasure and displeasure neither more nor less heavily than anyone else's—that the right action is to take little Joey to the circus. And it is only the net quantity of pleasure that counts, regardless of who experiences it. (Bentham, it may be noted, is famous for saying that if the quantity of pleasure is equal, pushpins—a dart game played in English pubs—is as good as poetry.)

John Stuart Mill, himself raised on utilitarian ethics by his father, came to believe that something was missing here, and so proposed an important modification: we must take into account not only the *quantity* of pleasure, but the *quality* as well, arguing (like the ancient Epicureans before him) that there were higher and lower pleasures. (Mill, it may be noted, is famous for saying that it is better to be Socrates in prison than to be a satisfied pig.) How, we ask, do we know what pleasures are higher and lower—who is to say? People who have competently experienced both, Mill answered, are the authority concerning which is pleasure is better. Those who have learned to appreciate more sophisticated music—whether it be classical or jazz or alternative rock—are unlikely to prefer the mass-market tunes. Those who have taken the time to experience the pleasures of silently gliding through the mangroves in a canoe or kayak, observing the wildlife undisturbed, will prefer it to wildly thrashing around in circles on a noisy jet ski—even though the latter pleasure is more intense. Those who have traveled to Paris, and learned to enjoy what its museums, cathedrals, and restaurants have to offer, are unlikely to prefer the Tyrone Mall.

The great strength of utilitarian ethics is in helping us to resolve moral conflicts. By applying the formula of the principle of utility, the “greatest pleasure principle”—calculating which set of actions would produce the greatest net increase in pleasure—we can have a flexible, yet decisive criterion for choosing between competing goods. If I weigh the displeasure of the shopkeeper in losing a few cents worth of bread inventory against the pleasure of my starving children in getting something to eat, then stealing the bread—if there are no other alternatives—is clearly justified on utilitarian grounds, even though the deontologist must condemn it soundly.

If I weigh my slight anxiety and mild discomfort in donating blood against the many future pleasures of someone whose life will be saved, then it is clear that it is best for me to be a blood donor. And in a practically minded, egalitarian society such as the United States, utilitarianism also seems quite attractive as a basis for social and economic policy.

But many questions arise about utilitarianism as well. Can the good really be calculated? Aren't there principles that should never be sacrificed? Some critics, for example, have argued that utilitarianism would allow scapegoating the innocent for the good of the majority. And aren't there some kinds of things that simply should not be done, no matter what seemingly positive consequences follow? Can we really accurately anticipate the outcomes of our actions? Isn't action inherently unpredictable in its effects? What about the issue of quantity versus quality of pleasures? If we stick with Bentham, and consider only the quantity, it would seem that the most vulgar and mindless pleasures (since they are both more intense and more accessible) will always win out. But if we side with Mill, including quality of pleasure, then it is no longer so easy to calculate the greatest pleasure. Do ten contemplative canoeists equal fifty jostling jet skiers, or are five sufficient? Is it really possible to say that the pleasure of the canoeist is more valuable, simply on the report of the competent bipartisan? And are human beings, after all, really nothing more than pleasure seekers? Is this, moreover, a moral framework that accords our humanity the full dignity that it deserves?

6. MAX SCHELER'S HIERARCHY OF VALUES

The twentieth century German philosopher Max Scheler was prominent

among those who believed that utilitarianism had degraded humanity by reducing all value to pleasure value. The mathematician Pascal had written several centuries earlier about a "logic of the heart," maintaining that "the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing." Scheler tried to vindicate that claim, arguing that (a) there is a hierarchical ranking of values that is just as rigorous as mathematical order, but that (b) unlike mathematics, this order could be grasped not through discursive reasoning, but through an eidetic affectivity—human feeling, purified of its subjectivity and relativity. (David Hume, a contemporary of Kant, had also based ethics on sentiment, but failed to distinguish affectivity from its historical embodiments.) Without going into the details of Scheler's "phenomenology" of values, it will be useful to outline his resultant value-hierarchy, which many find has a strong intuitive appeal.

Scheler discerned four orders of values, each having a higher rank than the lower rankings, and each containing a positive and negative term. At the lowest rank are *utility values*, the values of pleasure and pain. Other things being equal, it is an invariant of the moral world that pleasure is preferable to pain. At the second rank are what he called *vital values*: values of health vs. illness, strength vs. weakness, nobility vs. baseness. Scheler credited Nietzsche for rediscovering this realm of values, which utilitarian thinking had already begun to eclipse in the late nineteenth century. Health, strength, nobility are not reducible to mere pleasure, and these values are always preferable to pleasure, even if an individual mistakenly undertakes to prefer the lower order. Can a person be wrong in his or her value preferences, just as they might be wrong about a mathematical calculation? Scheler maintained that this was indeed the case, and some reflection will show that his

claim has a certain cogency. For example, is it not always an error to sacrifice health to pleasure? This is the error of the addict, for whose value-choice we feel a justifiable repugnance. Or can it ever be right to debase oneself for the sake of pleasure? Scheler is not a puritan here, and he has nothing at all against pleasure, and indeed maintains it is objectively preferable, other things being equal. But not if it is bought at the expense of health, or strength, or human dignity.

So far, these are values we share with animals, but the third and fourth levels, Scheler maintained, are unique to human beings. They can be called *formative values*, for they are formative or constitutive of our humanity. These are the values of the beautiful vs. the ugly, truth vs. falsehood, and justice vs. injustice. Scheler argued that here too, the beautiful is always preferable to the ugly, the true to the false, and the just to the unjust. And similarly, we should not sacrifice these values for the sake of lower ones. One should not tell a lie or commit an injustice for the sake of pleasure, or even for the sake of health or strength. Finally, there are the *spiritual values* of the *holy* and the *unholy*, the highest value-order of all. They should never, he maintained, be compromised for the sake of any lower order of value. And until the forging of a secular world in the modern West, no people in the history of humanity had ever disagreed.

7. THE MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF PETER SINGER

Peter Singer is the most visible representative today of the utilitarian tradition of ethics, due largely to the celebrity (or notoriety) he has gained through his boldness in drawing the tenets of a certain form of utilitarianism to their ultimate conclusion. To some, his

conclusions herald a brave new mode of thought to lead humanity to a world of greater ethical honesty, free from the shibboleths of the past. To others, his conclusions are so manifestly monstrous, that they cite his ethical theory as a *reduction ad absurdum* (a rebuttal, that refutes by showing absurd outcomes) of utilitarian theory as a whole.

Singer rejects Mill's concern with the quality of pleasure, and returns to Bentham's quantitative equation of pushpins and poetry. He even manages to take egalitarianism farther than Bentham, by basing his hedonic calculus not on pleasure (which could still be said to have an objective measure) but upon pleasure-preferences, i.e. upon something entirely subjective to the individual. *Only* the pleasure-preferences count in applying the formula of utility. But if this is the case, then we must note that animals too have pleasure preferences just like people, and thus are just as deserving of ethical consideration as human beings, if this is the sole criterion. Indeed, to think otherwise, argues Singer, is nothing more than *speciesism*, which he conceives on the basis of racism and sexism, i.e. the belief that human beings are inherently higher, or better, than animals. Singer believes that this "speciesism" is due to the Judeo-Christian belief that we are created "in the image of God," and thus that human life is something special, even something sacred, regarding it as the greatest obstacle to sound ethical judgment today.

In *Rethinking Life and Death*, Singer openly wages war upon this belief, claiming it has blinded us ethically not only to the alleged insight that we not inherently any more valuable than any other animal species, but also to the belief—which he takes as obvious—that the value of human life varies from person to person. Whereas the Judeo-Christian ethic had boldly

proclaimed, against paganism, that all human beings are created of equal worth, Singer's "First New Commandment" is: "Recognize that the worth of human life varies."⁶ Whereas the traditional ethics of the West, at least since the rise of Christianity, had taken as its foundation the notion of "the sanctity of life," making all people equally deserving of life and respect, Singer rejects this in favor of the concept of "quality of life." This newer standard, which judges human life on a case by case basis, will lead us to conclude that a healthy baby is clearly more valuable, and thus more deserving of ethical regard, than a severely handicapped baby. Likewise with the advanced Alzheimer's patient. Thus, there is no inherent moral objection, he argues, to either infanticide or euthanasia. (As a matter of record, Singer has maintained that parents should have at least four weeks to decide whether or not to kill their newborn child.) And recently, Singer has managed to eclipse controversy over even these positions and provocative statements (Singer equates the moral status of a new-born baby and a fish, contrasting both with a full-fledged person, who is capable of a wide range of pleasure-preferences) with his claim, made in a review on a soft-porn web site, that assuming pleasure is mutual, bestiality is not only morally unobjectionable, but that it is "speciesist" to see this as "lowering" the human person!⁷

These are not, of course, issues that are taken up in the readings from *Practical Ethics*, but they may nevertheless be important for calling into question the soundness of the ethical theory upon which these texts are made. Moreover, they alert us to what we must see a very real possibility—for some a most extreme

danger, and for some a promise. This is the possibility, evident in many social and intellectual trends today, that we will abandon our traditional teaching concerning the sanctity of human life, and embrace a *merely* Darwinian view of human beings as one more animal species among others. Not only has this teaching served as a foundational spiritual and metaphysical principle in the West since the time Plato, it can also be argued that the sanctity of life principle, in some form or another, is the only possible basis today for a strong, vigorous conviction of the reality of human rights and human dignity. Is it, indeed, a mere coincidence that the very concept of universal human rights originated in the West, in close proximity to Christian beliefs about the kinship of human beings to God? Can "quality of life" views ever support anything more than a series of compromises and trade-offs—draining value from our regard for each other, and cheapening life by subjecting it to the moral equivalent of cost-benefit analysis, making its value provisional and negotiable—once this sanctity principle is truly abandoned? To traditional sensibilities, Singer's views represent the most extreme and most insidious instance of modern-day "reductionism"—that is, our modern tendency to reduce the higher to the lower—even during an age in which the competition is stiff.

Finally, the conclusions he draws, even in the *Practical Ethics* readings, raise questions about the wisdom of relying on either ethical formula—the categorical imperative *or* the utility principle—to rigidly and mechanically derive our ethical views. For example, Singer maintains that a suffering person in a faraway land should receive exactly the ethical regard as a suffering person next door or even in our own family.⁸ In contrast, traditional ethics

⁶ Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996).

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 220.

⁸ It is of some interest that Singer's own mother died

has recognized the inclination, rooted in human nature, to have more affection for those closest to us, and to have most for those closest—children, parents, brothers, sisters, spouses—and they have built upon this saying that while we should care about all, we should care most about those closest. Isn't the abstract, rationalistic view, based upon some hedonic calculus, that each must count as only one unit, ultimately dehumanizing by demeaning and disregarding the deep bonds of family and community that we ought instead to be promoting? (This is not, of course, to suggest that we should be less than compassionate to those in faraway lands.) Surely there are times when we should think about how to maximize satisfaction, although many will feel that quality of satisfaction must always play a role. Surely there are other times that we should stand firm on principle, especially when rights and human dignity are involved, no matter what the consequences. But are formulas enough? Don't we stand in increasing need today of the wisdom of the naturalistic tradition, which through myth, literature, philosophy, scripture, theology, and even everyday maxim and adage gives us a deeper understanding of the human condition than any formula could, and that can contextualize the formulas themselves and assure that they do not become cruel and inhuman? (It is worth remembering that the horrors of both Nazi death camps and Soviet gulags proceeded from rationalistic schemes

that were willing to boldly abandon the traditional sensibilities and wisdom of humanity in favor of a promised future that sounded just great at first.) Nor can formulas help us to learn the kinds of virtues, those forms of human excellence, which will give us a positive sense of how life ought to be lived richly and fully and humanely and reverently. To the great question of how one should live one's life, which Socrates tells Glaucon is the most important of all questions, any partial or one-sided approach to an answer seems ill advised at best.

of Alzheimer's and that Singer, while openly *acknowledging that he was acting improperly out of moral weakness*, not only did not wish to have her euthanized (which under current law, happily, would not have been permitted anyway) but chose to spend considerable funds (that might have gone to famine relief) to keep her in comfort in a nursing home during her last days. We recall here the wisdom of Pascal, who knew as much about rationality as anyone, who referred (cited above) to "reasons of the heart" of which reason is ignorant.