Introduction

This topic concerns philosophical aspects of right and wrong and the idea of value. Moral philosophy is normally divided into three areas:

- **Meta-ethics**
  This is the theory of moral language, including the meaning and function of moral words. What are moral words for and what (if anything) do they represent? Can moral statements legitimately be described as 'true' or 'false' and, if so, how is their truth and falsity determined?

- **Substantive moral theory**
  This concerns different theories of what actually is right and wrong.

- **Applied ethics**
  This is about the application of moral ideas to real-life problems such as abortion, euthanasia, social justice and the environment.

The first two main sections of the guide are about meta-ethics. The first considers the nature of moral truth and how it is determined. The second examines the possibility that moral truth does not even exist. The last section turns to substantive moral theory and applied ethics. Three major moral theories are explained and discussed: utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics. Then, to illustrate the practical application of each theory, their implications for a particular real-life issue (abortion) are discussed.

Moral truth

1. Platonism

Before looking at Plato's theory of moral truth, it is worth mentioning, for purposes of contrast, the view that moral truth is determined purely and simply by the wishes of God. According to this view, whatever God wishes to happen is by definition 'right' and whatever he wishes not to happen is by definition 'wrong'. This is one form of what is known as **divine command theory**. Obviously this theory is not likely to appeal to atheists or agnostics, at least if they wish to retain some kind of commitment to morality. It is true that an atheist might accept the definition and then conclude that there is no moral truth because God does not exist. But more often, atheists will say that moral truth does not depend on God and so the non-existence of God does not threaten it. But the proposed conception of moral truth creates difficulties for theists as well. If moral goodness just is accordance with the wishes of God, it would seem to be tautological to say that God wishes only good things. But theists usually think that God should be worshipped at least in part because he is supremely good, in which case his goodness could not be a mere tautology.

From this point of view, a more satisfactory account of moral truth would be that it obtains independently of God. One such view is that of Plato. Plato's view of moral truth likens it to mathematical truth, so let us briefly consider that first.

Most of us know a certain amount of simple mathematics. But we know these things without ever having observed any mathematical objects such as numbers or mathematical shapes such as triangles. True, we do see in the observable world structures that approximate to triangles. But they are not real triangles, for their lines always have some thickness and they are never perfectly straight. While such things may help us to think about perfect mathematical triangles, they are not
the mathematical triangles themselves. So how do we know things about the latter (e.g. that all their interior angles add up to 180°)? Plato's answer is that we learned these things in a former life. What we see in this life are mere imperfect copies of these perfect objects. He called the perfect objects *forms*. And just as there is the form of the perfect triangle, so there is also the form of the Good (and of other qualities), to which things in the observable world approximate by being partially, but not wholly, good.

Few today would take seriously the idea that we had former lives in which we were acquainted with the various forms. But the general gist of Plato's theory—that we have some innate concept of goodness that does not depend on empirical observation—is one that has lasted longer. When I talk about 'Platonism' or 'Platonistic ethics', I will be referring to this idea detached from the implausible theory of a former life. A further important aspect of Platonism is the thesis that while we all have some basic concept of goodness, some of us have this concept more clearly and accurately than others. This is because philosophical reflection can improve our grasp of the Good. Hence competent, practising philosophers —according to Plato—will have acquired deeper and truer moral beliefs than ordinary people. This is sometimes known as *moral elitism*. Plato drew far-reaching conclusions from it. He thought that society was best run by 'philosopher kings' who would have the wisdom and knowledge to enact laws that would enable all people to live together in an ordered and just society.

Many have been attracted to Plato's meta-ethical theory (which of course we have only briefly sketched here) because it seems to secure for moral goodness and rightness a certain *objectivity*. Morality is not for Plato (as it seemed to be according to his opponents of that period, the Sophists) a mere matter of opinion or feeling. It is independent of human sentiment, grounded in the perfect world of the forms. On the other hand, many have found problems in Plato's view, such as:

- Moral elitism seems objectionable to those who think that there are no 'moral experts' and that we are all potentially capable of working out for ourselves what is the right thing to do.
- According to Plato, moral perfection is entirely knowledge-based. If you know and understand the form of the Good, you will know exactly what to do and you will do it. Bad behaviour results only from ignorance. But this ignores the fact that morality is not only about knowledge, but also about *motivation*. You may know what is the right thing to do, but still not do it because of what is called 'weakness of will'. This seems to be a real phenomenon, one that Plato's theory appears to reject.

2. Naturalism

A completely different meta-ethical theory is known as *naturalism*. Naturalists react against what they see as obscurity and mystery in Platonism. It is quite hard to understand what the form of the Good actually *is*. It is supposed to be something different from individual good things and yet 'inheres' in them. Perhaps it is simply the abstract property of goodness, but the problem with this interpretation is that it would not give a special status to *perfect* goodness, for if there is an abstract property of perfect goodness, why shouldn't there be abstract properties for inferior levels of goodness as well? Some of the claims made about the form of the good also provoke scepticism. It is independent of the observable world, has always existed and will always exist. Can there really be such a thing? Such scepticism extends beyond Plato's own theory to approaches that are broadly platonic in the sense that they locate the source of values in a realm beyond the senses. After all, when we decide whether something is good, we appeal to features of it that can be observed either
directly or indirectly. For example, we might say that a person is good because they are kind, honest and brave. Although we cannot directly observe their kindness, honesty and bravery as such, we can observe the actions that display these qualities. To take another example, we might say that an action is morally wrong because it is cruel and the latter can be known by observing the action and its effects on people. This suggests that we might be able to define moral words like 'good', 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' in terms of 'natural', that is, observable, properties. This is the thesis of naturalism.

What would the definitions look like? Perhaps a 'good person' just means a person who is kind, honest and brave and a 'wrong action' is one that is cruel, dishonest or cowardly. But there are a number of serious problems with such definitions:

- People's conceptions of what counts as a good person or wrong action change over time. For example, as Derek Parfit has pointed out, the vast majority of people once thought that chastity was an essential attribute of a good person, whereas now it is probably only a minority of people who think this. But this surely does not mean that the meaning of the word 'good' has changed. It is rather that people's ways of determining when goodness is present in a person's character have altered.

- In effect, the proposed definitions give 'lists' of attributes that constitute goodness or rightness (or whatever it might happen to be). But surely these attributes have something in common and it is precisely that which constitutes the real meaning of the moral word concerned.

- At least part of the aim of the definitions is to explain moral concepts in terms of non-moral ones, but words like 'kind', 'honest', 'brave', 'cruel', 'dishonest' and 'cowardly' are actually moral words, as they already reveal certain particular stances of approval or disapproval.

The lesson we need to draw from all this is that the naturalist has got to find a more plausible way of defining the moral words, one that does not just depend on giving a list. Before proceeding, though, we should mention one complication. The word 'good' can be applied to different sorts of things, not just to people (as we have been assuming in the above discussion) but also to objects, states of affairs and so on. In application to a person, it describes the person's character or personality, but clearly it does not do this in application to objects, states of affairs, types of behaviour or institutions. A complete naturalistic account of the meaning of 'good' (not to mention all the other moral words) would need to cater for all these types of uses and we shall not attempt this here. But here are some possible candidate definitions for the meaning of 'good' as it applies to types of behaviour or institutions:

- 'Good' means 'conducive to human survival'.
- 'Good' means 'tending to satisfy human desires to the greatest degree possible'.
- 'Good' means 'tending to satisfy the desires of a fully-informed, rational agent'.

These definitions clearly vary in terms of plausibility. But what we are interested in here is the type of definition involved, which defines goodness in terms of properties that can be detected, directly or indirectly, by observation. According to British philosopher G.E. Moore (1873-1958), any definition of 'good' following this sort of pattern, that is, attempting to define the word in terms of factually verifiable properties, must be wrong. It represents what he calls the 'naturalistic fallacy'. In order to show that all such attempted definitions are defective, he uses the open question argument. This is really quite a simple idea. To illustrate it, take the first definition of the three above. Now
suppose that something \(X\) satisfies that definition: that is to say, it is conducive to human survival. Now consider whether someone who thought this could meaningfully ask: 'Is \(X\) good?'. In other words, when it is admitted that something satisfies the definition, could it still be an open question whether it is in fact good. It is clear that it could. And the same is true of each of the other definitions and indeed of any definition of 'good' that might be given in terms of factually verifiable properties. This is not to deny that some of the possible definitions are more plausible than others. The point is that whichever set of properties is chosen as the basis of the definition, it would still be *intelligible* to ask whether something satisfying that set of properties was good—if someone did ask this, we would know what they meant, even if we thought their question absurd. (Contrast this with someone who says: 'I know he's an unmarried man, but is he a bachelor?' This question makes no sense given the standard definition of the word 'bachelor'.) It follows, Moore argues, that no set of factually verifiable properties can give the meaning of the word 'good'--or of any other moral word, for that matter. If this is granted, then the attempt to 'naturalise' morality fails. In fact, Moore describes goodness as a 'non-natural' property. It is a real property that things can have or lack, but their doing so is not a matter of possessing or lacking any particular set of observable or verifiable characteristics. Moore's position is often expressed by saying that no 'ought' follows from an 'is'. In other words, however detailed and subtle a description we might give of the facts of a situation, it would never be enough to prove that a particular moral position was the correct one, as it would always be coherent or intelligible for someone to accept all these facts, but take a different moral position.

But Moore's idea that goodness and other ethical properties are 'non-natural' can seem strange. After all, the non-naturalist doesn't deny (because it is clearly true, as we saw above) that people and things have the moral properties they do purely *in virtue* of the factually verifiable properties that they possess. But how can there be properties of people and actions that are based on natural properties in the way suggested, but not actually natural themselves?

Are there other, perhaps clearer, ways of explaining how moral properties depend on the facts of the situation while avoiding crude naturalism? Two that have been proposed are:

- The 'relational' theory: moral truth is based on relational properties which provide reasons for (or against) action.
- The theory that moral properties are analogous to secondary qualities.

To explain the first theory, consider the judgement that the death penalty is wrong because it is excessively cruel. As we saw earlier, words like 'cruel' already incorporate a moral stance: if someone describes an action as cruel, we can presume that they disapprove of it. But arguably, this 'bias' can in principle be removed by replacing the word 'cruel' by a more factual account of what cruelty actually involves (very roughly: causing suffering for another person or creature). Then the relational theory can be illustrated by saying that the truth of the statement 'Cruelty is wrong' is based on a *relation* between cruel actions (neutrally conceived) and *individual people* (or other moral agents) that gives them a reason for not doing these sorts of actions. This relation will be some form of disapproval or rejection. Notice that this account does not view the wrongness as a simple property of the actions themselves. The same actions will not be wrong in relation to beings who, unlike us, do not reject cruelty. It appears to follow that this theory is a form of *moral relativism*. (Moral relativism will be more closely examined in the section entitled 'Denying Moral Truth'.)

The second theory is more sophisticated. To understand it, recall the distinction between primary
and secondary qualities. The primary qualities of an object—such as length, width and weight are the truly physical properties that would figure in a scientific explanation of that object's behaviour. The secondary qualities are those that would not figure in any such explanation—examples include colours, textures and pitches. Science never explains any physical phenomenon in terms of colour. In a sense, colour and other secondary qualities do not exist as far as science is concerned. (This is not to deny that the perception of colour etc. might be important in a biological explanation, but that's another matter.) What exactly does a secondary quality, such as red, consist in? A popular suggestion takes the subjective 'redness' of a sensation as basic and then defines a 'red object' as one that is disposed to produce red sensations for appropriately equipped perceivers under certain circumstances. It is argued that all secondary qualities are, in a similar way, dispositions to produce sensations. (Of course, the ultimate explanation of such dispositions will lie in the primary qualities of the objects.)

How does this help with meta-ethics? Well, just as science makes no mention of secondary qualities, so it also lacks any reference to moral properties. There is no place for values in the subject-matter of science. (Of course the social sciences do often refer to the values that people accept or believe in, but this no more involves reference to real values than the statement that Jim believes Pegasus is hungry refers to a real winged horse.) However, like secondary qualities, the moral properties of objects could be treated as dispositions. For example, 'good' could be said to be the property of being disposed to give rise to certain kinds of responses in certain kinds of creatures. These would be responses of approval or perhaps some inclination to protect or promote the person or object described as good— the details needn't concern us here. What is important is that the defender of this view seems to be able to reconcile the fact that the subject-matter of science is value-free with the idea that there is nothing mysterious or 'non-natural' about goodness and other ethical properties. There is no more mystery here than there is in the case of colour and other secondary qualities.

But there are still difficulties. For one thing, it is not clear that this theory avoids Moore's open question problem. For it would seem perfectly intelligible to say 'X would give rise to positive responses in certain creatures, but it is not actually good', and this should not be intelligible if the secondary quality theory is true. Another point is that, like the relational theory (which it obviously resembles to an extent), this theory does not seem to steer clear of moral relativism. Or if it does, then this is only by some kind of 'cheat', as it defines goodness in terms of responses from certain sorts of creatures only and it might be asked why the responses of these creatures should be privileged over those of others. (For example, 'normal people' may respond in a positive way to those who are brave, honest etc. and so call them good, but what is special about their responses that makes them more legitimate evaluators than those who disapprove of such individuals?)

3. Other issues

We have looked at two very different meta-ethical theories: Platonism and Naturalism. The rest of this section will briefly look at three main issues that arise in relation to both theories: the problem of moral knowledge; the possibility of agreement over moral truth; and the extent to which such truths can motivate particular actions.

(a) Moral knowledge

We have looked at what sort of thing moral truth is, but what about the question of how we can come to know particular moral truths? How do we know, for example, that it is generally wrong to
lie or to be unkind? Of course the answer depends to a large extent on the style of theory that we adopt concerning moral truth. If we are naturalists of some kind, we will probably think that there is no special problem about moral knowledge. For naturalists think that moral knowledge is a form of factual knowledge about the world and so to get it we must apply the normal methods that we use to find out about the world around us, which is basically a combination of observation and reason. If, for example, we think that 'good' means 'conducive to human survival' then, in order to find out what is good, we need simply apply our normal methods of observation and reasoning to determine what is conducive to human survival. There is no necessary expectation, by the way, that this is always going to be easy. While there will be some easily verified instances (for example, consuming food in moderation), there will also be cases in which it is difficult to know the answer. For example, is capitalism conducive to human survival (in the long term, that is)? The answer is not obvious and reasonable moral agents can disagree. Sometimes it is easy to tell whether something is good; sometimes it isn't.

As we saw, Plato believed that knowledge of moral truth was a kind of remembering of things first encountered in a previous life. What about more recent non-naturalists? As we saw, Moore believed that goodness was a non-natural property. This does not in itself necessarily mean that we know it by 'non-natural' (supernatural?) means. After all, Moore recognises that it is in virtue of its natural properties that a thing is good or bad and it is by natural (empirical) means that we know the natural properties of objects. On the other hand, because of the open question problem, Moore would also say that, for any good thing \( X \), it is possible that a person could know all the relevant natural properties of \( X \) and yet not know that \( X \) was good—in which case, the question arises: how is this additional knowledge acquired? Is it by means of some special 'moral sense', analogous to the familiar five senses that we use to determine natural properties? This would put the non-naturalist in an awkward position, for there appears to be no scientific evidence for the existence of any such dedicated moral sense. Of course, there is such a thing as 'conscience' and no doubt it can be studied scientifically, but it seems likely, on the face of things, that conscience is some form of emotional response rather than a moral sense as such.

\( (b) \) Moral agreement

It hardly needs pointing out that morality is a great source of controversy. Apart from a few very basic principles (such as those proscribing lying and murder), nearly all the content of any actual moral code would meet with dissent—sometimes passionate dissent—from other quarters. On the other hand, some degree of moral agreement is one of the goals of ethics—it is highly unsatisfactory, even dangerous, if we all think differently about such important matters as the death penalty, the environment and the morality of warfare. I want to look briefly at how the meta-ethical approaches we have looked at so far would compare on the question of moral agreement.

Platonists would maintain that agreement is always possible in principle: it is to be achieved by knowing the form of the good intimately and such knowledge is the chief aim of the philosophical elite within society. Of course, those who try to think about moral matters but lack the necessary philosophical insight will no doubt fall into much confusion and disagreement. But Plato favoured a strict allocation of appropriate roles to different members of society and he would have said that those not suited to fundamental moral deliberation should not be attempting it, but should instead take their guidance from the 'moral experts' (the philosophers). In our day and age, a much more democratic approach is normally preferred. Most assume that it is, within certain limits, valid for anyone to decide for themselves what is the morally right thing to do. However (and I suggest this only as a possibility for discussion), perhaps it could be said that things have swung too far away
from Plato in this regard. Perhaps we do not give enough weight to the likelihood that people's moral opinions will be worth more if they know more of the relevant facts and have thought more deeply about them.

Contemporary non-naturalists (often referred to as intuitionists) usually maintain that, although there may be some disagreement about moral matters, there is also a high degree of consensus about the basic principles, since every normal person has the required moral intuitions. In fact, an intuitionist might argue that moral disagreement is really factual disagreement in disguise. We might disagree about the morality of the death penalty, for example, because we disagree about its consequences (whether it is an effective deterrent, perhaps), not because we differ on the moral principles involved. This is an attractive view, but not a very plausible one. For although there is indeed a fair measure of agreement about the basic moral principles when stated in broad terms (e.g. that it is wrong to kill the innocent), disagreement arises in their application. (Is it morally acceptable if civilians are the predictable, though unintended, target of military action in a 'just war'? ) Some of the reasons for this disagreement may be factual, but not all of it is, since people often persist in their moral disagreements even when all the relevant facts are known to all parties.

Finally, what of naturalism? Naturalists would object to the very contrast between 'factual' and 'moral' disagreement, as for them, disagreement about what is right and wrong just is disagreement about certain facts. This view is attractive in a different way, for if the only obstacle to moral agreement is factual disagreement, the former should be much more attainable than we might have supposed. However, the theory comes to grief when confronted with Moore's open question argument, as well as with the observation concluding the previous paragraph.

There is more to be said on the issue of moral disagreement, but it depends on the issue of relativism, which will be examined later.

(c) Motivation of actions

It is often said that morality is ultimately about action, about what we should or should not do. But then this raises the question of how, in the different theory-types that we have been examining, actions are motivated.

It is useful to mention here the idea of moral internalism. This is the thesis that if one accepts a moral view (for example, that such-and-such is good or some action would be one's duty), then, as a matter of logical necessity, one must be at least partly inclined to behave in certain ways rather than others. For example, if one accepts that it is one's duty to tell the truth, one must be at least partly inclined to tell the truth in relevant circumstances. As we saw above, there does appear to be something called 'weakness of will', whereby one knows what is the right thing to do, but chooses not to do it. But this, it can be argued, does not conflict with moral internalism, as the latter only requires one to be at least partly inclined to tell the truth when one recognises that it is the right thing to do. One argument for moral internalism is that having the inclinations appropriate to your moral views is a mark of sincerity: if you made the relevant moral statements and did not have those inclinations, you could quite reasonably be called insincere. You wouldn't 'really believe' the views that you appeared to be expressing in your moral utterances. Although not every contemporary moral philosopher accepts moral internalism, it appears to be the majority view. It could be regarded as a less extreme version of Plato's view that anyone who knows what is good will necessarily pursue it, though unlike the latter in only requiring an inclination to pursue what one thinks to be good.
If we do accept moral internalism, then there seems to be a problem for naturalist theories. Take the example naturalist conception discussed above: 'Good' means 'conducive to human survival'. If this is right, whenever anyone says 'Capitalism is good', they mean 'Capitalism is conducive to human survival'. The trouble is that someone could coherently think that capitalism was conducive to human survival and yet not be in the least inclined to promote capitalism. Such a person would not really, sincerely, believe that capitalism was good because the true test of someone's beliefs about what is good concerns what they would be prepared to do in relevant circumstances and this person fails that test. The point can be repeated for any other naturalist definition. This is because they all define 'good' (and other moral words) in terms of factually verifiable properties and it is always possible to know verifiable facts about a thing without having any particular psychological disposition either to promote it or to suppress it. In other words, naturalism is incompatible with moral internalism.

In contrast, there is certainly no lack of moral internalism in Plato's theory. For Plato thought that it was impossible in the strictest sense for someone to know what is the morally right thing to do and yet not do it. But there lies the problem: the moral internalism in Plato's view seems excessive, since, as we saw, it does not allow for weakness of will, in which people know what the right thing to do is, but are unable to bring themselves to do it. Moral internalism is very plausible, but in its moderate form, which requires only an inclination to do what one believes to be good.

What about Moore's theory? Can it incorporate moderate internalism in a plausible way? This is a hard question to answer, partly because of the difficulty in understanding the theory itself. As we mentioned above, the idea of a non-natural property is a problematic one, since it is hard to understand how a property that depends purely on natural properties would not itself be natural. If we knew the answer to this question, we might be able to tell whether recognition of non-natural properties necessitates dispositions to behave in certain ways. But certainly, on the face of it, it is unclear how Moore's theory can incorporate moral internalism.

So naturalism, Platonism and Moore's theory all find it difficult to handle moral motivation, at least if we are correct in supposing that the latter should be construed in terms of internalism.

4. Moral truth: concluding remarks

Both of the theories mentioned at this point in the syllabus have proved unsatisfactory. Platonism cannot account for weakness of will and also seems to involve an objectionable moral elitism. Naturalism is a much more straightforward theory, but (perhaps because of this) it seems unable to do justice to the nature of moral thinking (in particular the fact that any statement of the form 'X things are good', where X stands for some verifiable property, can be coherently denied). So maybe we need some different form of theory altogether. Notice a fundamental assumption shared by both theories: that there is such a thing as moral truth. Now it might seem hard for moral philosophers to question this assumption. If moral truth did not exist, how could there be real moral standards that could rationally compel people? This seems to be a serious problem, but others may be more tractable. Indeed, as we shall see, if we decide not to think of morality in terms of (objective) truth and falsity, we entirely avoid some of the problems affecting both Platonism and naturalism.
The denial of moral truth

1. General considerations

We are investigating the idea that there is no such thing as moral truth. Another way of putting this is to say that there are no moral facts. Of course, this does not mean that there are no moral opinions. That would be empirically false. The claim is rather that there is no standard of objective truth against which people's moral opinions can be judged and on the basis of which we could declare one person's opinion 'better' than another's.

What reasons could be given for this? Well, one significant consideration is something that has long been noticed by anthropologists and indeed anyone with a wide knowledge of different cultures and societies: the enormous variety in moral practices and attitudes. As we noted above, there is hardly a single thing that is considered wrong in one society that has not been considered quite acceptable in some other society on Earth at another place or time. (Perhaps the only exceptions to this are murder and theft—but even here there is variation in the precise form that these prohibitions take: for example, killing criminals is 'murder' in some cultures; in others it is justice.) This observation seems to support the idea of moral relativism, that morality is relative to different cultures and societies. But here there is an important distinction to be made: that between descriptive and normative relativism:

- **DESCRIPTIVE RELATIVISM** is the claim that, as a matter of fact, there is no such thing as a single morality. There are many different moralities, depending on the culture being discussed.
- **NORMATIVE RELATIVISM** is the claim that moral judgements are valid only in relation to particular cultures. A moral judgement that is valid relative to one culture may not be valid relative to another.

Note that only normative relativism is a thesis of moral philosophy (specifically meta-ethics). Descriptive relativism is just a matter of plain fact. Note also that it is normative relativism, not descriptive relativism, that presents a challenge to the idea of objective truth about what is morally right and wrong. Descriptive relativism just makes a factual claim and says nothing about the validity of moral judgements as such.

It seems to be true furthermore that one can be a descriptive relativist without being a normative relativist. Though descriptive relativism may suggest normative relativism, it does not entail it. One could say that although, in fact, there is no one morality that is accepted by all cultures, still there is only one morality that is actually correct. Why might one wish to adopt this view? I think the answer is linked to the issues discussed in the previous section. We found both naturalism and Platonism unsatisfactory as accounts of the nature of morality. Both take very seriously the idea of objective moral truth. This suggested the idea that taking objective moral truth seriously might be the cause of the problem. We decided that we needed to consider the more radical option of giving an account of morality that does not depend on this concept.

Several possibilities have been suggested. They are known collectively as non-cognitivist theories. ('Cognition' means roughly the same as 'knowledge' and one feature of these theories is that they seem to deny the possibility of moral knowledge in any familiar sense of that phrase.) We will look at the two best-known ones: emotivism and prescriptivism.

2. Emotivism
This is the view that moral statements are more like expressions of emotion than statements of fact. The view is mainly associated with American philosopher C.L. Stevenson (1908-1979) and British philosopher A.J. Ayer (1910-1989). Consider the sentence 'Stealing is wrong'. Because of its grammatical form, this looks like a statement of fact that can be either true or false. If, in fact, stealing is wrong, then the sentence is true; if it is not, then it is false. The emotivist rejects this 'common sense' view. In its simplest form (as in Ayer), emotivism likens the sentence to an exclamation such as 'Stealing? Boo!' or 'Down with stealing!'. Stevenson's version of the theory is more complex, but what both have in common is the idea that the main business of such a sentence is not to say something true, but to express one's emotions or one's attitude towards something. Attitudes can of course be positive as well as negative, as in 'Hooray for honesty!', which would be an emotivist rendering of 'Honesty is a good thing'.

**Strengths and weaknesses of emotivism**

**Strengths:**

- Unlike Platonists, emotivists don't have to worry about explaining moral knowledge. For the emotivist, there are no moral facts, so there is no such thing as moral knowledge, as normally understood. There are just attitudes and feelings.
- Unlike naturalism, emotivism doesn't seem to be vulnerable to the open question argument. As we saw above, this argument says that no definition of 'good' in terms of natural (empirically verifiable) properties will be satisfactory, because it will always make sense to ask whether things with those properties are good. But obviously emotivism does not define 'good' and other moral words in terms of natural properties, because saying that something is good is, on the emotivist theory, a matter of expressing a positive attitude towards it, not asserting that it has some property or other.
- For those who accept moral internalism, emotivism seems advantageous, because (arguably) it is logically necessary that if someone has (say) a positive attitude towards something, they will be at least inclined to try to protect it, promote it etc.

**Weaknesses**

- It seems that if emotivism is true, then morality is subjective, since emotions and attitudes are dependent on the individual. This would seem to create a situation in which one person's morality is as good as any other's.
- There seems to be a semantic problem with the theory. If 'Stealing is wrong' means the same as 'Down with stealing!' then 'If stealing is wrong then people should be punished for doing it' should mean 'If down with stealing then people should be punished for doing it' or 'If down with stealing then down with not punishing people for doing it', neither of which is even grammatical. In other words, although the theory may appear acceptable for 'stand alone' moral sentences, it does not seem to work for cases in which the moral sentence is contained as a subordinate clause within a complex sentence.
3. Prescriptivism

Moral prescriptivism was developed by the British philosopher R.M Hare (1919-2002). Whereas emotivism likens moral sentences to exclamations, prescriptivism likens them to imperatives or commands. The theory treats moral claims as essentially action-guiding.

Consider a command such as 'Cook the dinner!'. To understand what this sentence means, it is necessary to understand its link with action, to know, in other words, that the utterance of this sentence would most likely be used to try to get the person to whom it was addressed to cook the dinner. Could we say 'You morally ought to cook the dinner' just means the same as 'Cook the dinner'? Clearly not, for a command might be given for reasons other than moral ones. (I might order you to cook the dinner just because I'm hungry and I know that if I order you, you'll do it.) If moral sentences are commands, they must be very special kinds of commands.

According to Hare, what distinguishes moral sentences from more basic commands is that they are *universalisable*. What this means is that a competent speaker who makes a moral statement sincerely must be prescribing what should be done, not just in the current situation by the person they are currently addressing, but in all similar situations by all people similarly placed. Here is an example. Suppose I say 'Morally speaking, you ought to cook my dinner'. How on Hare's view would this be different from just saying 'Cook my dinner'? The answer is that in the former case, and not the latter, I not only tell you to cook my dinner; I also convey the fact that I would give the same order, or make the same 'prescription', to anybody similarly placed to you in any similar situation. Here the word 'similar' must be taken to mean 'similar in all morally relevant respects'. To fill out the example, we would have to imagine why I might say that you were morally obliged to cook my dinner. Perhaps I have been cooking your dinners for a week and, out of fairness, I think it's now your turn. In that case what is meant by saying 'anybody who is similarly placed to you in any similar situation' means (roughly) anyone who has been having his dinners cooked by another person for rather a long period of time and is now able to reciprocate or, more generally (if vaguely) —anyone who owes a 'moral debt' to some other person.

This account works well for moral statements prescribing behaviour for the person whom one is addressing ('Morally, you ought to...'). But, as it stands, it will not accommodate statements describing what people other than the addressee ought to do (e.g. 'I ought morally to...'; 'David Cameron ought morally to...') Hare deals with this by invoking what in grammar is called a 'first person imperative', a 'command' addressed to oneself, e.g. 'Let me be good today'. The latter (when combined with the universalisation requirement), might be a good analysis of 'Morally, I ought to be good today'. For 'Morally, David Cameron ought to be good today', we could perhaps say something like: 'Let David Cameron or anyone in a situation similar to his in all morally relevant respects, be good today' (a formulation that already includes universalisation).

To summarise: for Hare, moral sentences are commands or prescriptions of a special kind: ones that can be generalised to apply to all relevantly similar people in all relevantly similar circumstances.

*Strengths and weaknesses of prescriptivism*

*Strengths*

Some of the strengths of prescriptivism are the same as those already identified for emotivism:

- As in emotivism, morality is still considered to be fundamentally a matter of attitudes and
so there is no need for any explanation of 'moral knowledge'.

- It is not vulnerable to the open question argument, unlike naturalism.

Other strengths (not shared with emotivism):

- Because it incorporates universalisation, it seems to be more objective than emotivism. Moral commands need to be right not just for me, but also for all others similarly placed.
- For those sympathetic to moral internalism, prescriptivism is perhaps the most attractive theory of all, as it directly links acceptance of moral statements to action. If 'Stealing is wrong' is to be analysed as a universalised version of 'Let me not steal!', it follows that no-one could sincerely accept this moral statement unless they had at least some inclination not to steal.

Weaknesses

- Although we mentioned as a strength that prescriptivism seems more objective than emotivism, it may be thought that it is not objective enough, since its basis still lies in subjective desires.

The rest of this section will look at two particular issues that arise in relation to theories that deny the possibility of moral truth.

4. Judging other cultures

As already mentioned, moral practices vary enormously from one society or culture to another. What should our attitude be to cultures that take a different view on particular points of morality from that taken by our own? It is usually taken as a mark of sensitivity and sophistication to exercise a certain tolerance in relation to the divergent practices of other cultures. This is certainly true of such matters as etiquette and religious practices. But morality seems to be different in the eyes of most people. Consider the practice of depriving women of education. This is morally abhorrent to western societies. But in certain cultures, it is treated as mandatory. The question is whether, on the sort of meta-ethical views we have been considering, we are justified in claiming it to be morally wrong, given its endorsement by these other cultures. Certainly we can say how much we dislike such practices: not only would we (nowadays) be loath to adopt them ourselves, but also we are appalled by their being practised in other cultures, perhaps to the extent that we want to take positive steps to prevent them from happening. But that is not the same thing as saying that they are morally wrong. Or is it?

Contemporary emotivist Simon Blackburn (b. 1944) thinks that those who adopt the emotivist view (he prefers to call it 'expressivist') are perfectly entitled to describe moral sentences as 'true' or 'false' in a non-relative way. Consider Blackburn's own example of a member of the Taliban who sincerely asserts 'Women should not be educated'. Is his sentence or assertion true? Most of us would say not, because we strongly profess and adhere to different moral standards on these matters. But the relativist about moral truth may want to say that the Taliban member's statement is 'true for him' and 'false for us', while our contrary statement that women should be educated is 'true for us' but 'false for him'. Blackburn will have none of this. He thinks that to describe the Taliban member's statement as 'true for him' is to grant it some sort of merit when it has none. Furthermore, he does not think that expressivism commits us to describing the statement in this way. If we were to do so, we would be showing some kind of tolerance for the Taliban member's attitudes. But this tolerance...
is itself an attitude, one that might be expressed in a moral statement, such as 'We should be (somewhat) tolerant of the moral views of other cultures'. And no meta-ethical theory (Blackburn would say) implies anything about what particular substantive moral views we should or should not have. To suppose otherwise would be to make the mistake of collapsing the distinction made right at the start of this guide between meta-ethics on the one hand and substantive moral theory and applied ethics on the other. That would be fundamentally misguided, since the meanings of moral words (which are the concern of meta-ethics) have no definite bearing on the issue of what particular things are right or wrong.

Blackburn's point is well taken. There is certainly a type of moral relativism, a favourite bugbear of the Church and certain sections of the media, that would not be entailed by any form of non-cognitivism. It is precisely the type that Blackburn has in his sights here, a view which demands from us an attitude of complete tolerance of other cultures' different (and perhaps to us abhorrent) moral standards. Blackburn is right to say that this is itself a substantive moral view and no meta-ethical view about the meanings of words could force it on us. On the other hand, phrases like 'true for a' or 'true relative to a' are really technical terms and can be used by a theorist in any way she wishes, as long as she makes her meaning clear. In saying that some sentence is true for a Taliban member but not for us, she does not have to be commending the sentence. (She will probably only commend those sentences that are true for her, the theorist.) And if, as some meta-ethicists believe, the concept of relative truth is useful in their discipline, then they are entitled to use it without being accused of moral relativism in any 'bad' sense. We might call them 'semantic moral relativists' as distinct from 'substantive moral relativists'.

5. Moral progress and moral mistakes

Both concepts referred to in this sub-heading are somewhat problematic. A (semantic) moral relativist will probably reject them if they are intended to be understood in any objective sense. What is a mistake relative to one person or culture may be morally correct relative to another. And how one conceives of moral progress depends on what one's particular moral ideals happen to be. (For example, moral progress may involve taking a more compassionate and 'therapeutic' attitude to criminals according to one ideal, but taking a more retributive or retaliatory approach on another.) If moral relativism is right, then neither view is objectively more correct than the other.

However, it is perhaps time to introduce a certain caveat. There are many different kinds of relativist theories and the distinction between semantic relativism and substantive relativism is by no means the only important one. It is possible to take the view that morality does ultimately depend on subjective preferences, wishes or attitudes, but that these preferences need to conform to certain conditions if they are to be considered an adequate basis for moral principles. We have already mentioned Hare's idea that such preferences must be 'universalisable'. Even more frequently encountered is the suggestion that they must be rational. This is usually understood to mean that they are the sorts of preferences that would survive some process of reflection which satisfies certain requirements, such as sensitivity to the facts, correct employment of the rules of logic and of evidential standards and so on. On this view, what is morally right relative to a given individual or society is not simply what that individual or society prefers, but what they would prefer if they deliberated as rationally as possible. It might be that if we were to adopt this more sophisticated theory, we might find that more agreement about standards of right and wrong was possible. It has even been suggested that maximum rationality, together with the possession of maximum relevant information, might eliminate all disagreement. In that case, the idea of an objective moral mistake would seem to be a valid one. However, there are good grounds for scepticism about this
suggestion. For it seems very possible that two people could agree about all the facts and both be perfectly rational when discussing, say, euthanasia, but still disagree about whether or not it is morally right or wrong in a given situation. (You may want to consider whether this is really true when you come to examine a specific moral issue in detail.)

Moral decisions

1. Introduction

Over the centuries, three main traditions have developed for theorising about moral concerns: Utilitarianism, Deontology and Virtue Ethics. We can illustrate the differences between the three main approaches by means of a concrete example: say, a situation in which you have to decide whether to grant a terminally ill person’s wish to die. I don’t want to discuss this issue in detail, but only to use it to clarify the difference between the three approaches.

UTILITARIANISM will consider the consequences of granting the person’s wish—for them and anyone else affected. Consequences are assessed in terms of people’s well-being. If the action produces the best overall consequences for people’s well-being, then the utilitarian considers it morally right.

DEONTOLOGY will consider whether in granting the person’s wish you would be conforming to moral rules that seem intuitively correct, e.g. ‘Do not kill’. Deontologists think that these rules need to be adhered to, irrespective of their consequences, for the most part.

VIRTUE ETHICS will consider whether the act would be the kind of thing that a virtuous person would do, e.g., would granting the person’s wish be the sort of thing that a kind person would do or the sort of thing that a cruel person would do?

2. Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a theory particularly associated with philosophers writing in English. Hints of utilitarianism can be found in the writings of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and David Hume (1711-1776), but the originator of the doctrine is usually considered to be Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) who famously thought that the aim of morality should be to seek ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’, a characteristic utilitarian idea. The theory was defended and further developed by John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900). In our own day, the most famous utilitarian philosopher is the Australian Peter Singer (b. 1946), particularly well-known for his application of the theory to the issue of our treatment of non-human animals.

Utilitarian ethics emphasises consequences above all else. The point of morality, according to the utilitarian, is to maximise the balance of good consequences over bad consequences (for those affected by our actions). Different versions of the theory are generated by giving different answers to these two questions:

(a) What exactly is supposed to be evaluated for its consequences: individual actions or overall practices and rules?

(b) How do we tell when, and to what extent, consequences are good or bad?

Act utilitarianism
For an act utilitarian, the morally right act is the one which, in the current circumstances, has the best expected consequences. To be sure of acting morally, on this view, you must consider all the alternative actions that you are able to do in the situation in which you find yourself and choose the one with the best expected balance of good consequences over bad consequences. (If two or more acts turn out to be equal in this respect, then it doesn't matter which one of these you do on the act utilitarian view.) It is important to understand that you have to concern yourself with all the consequences of the given action relevant to how well others' lives go, not just those that affect you personally. (In fact, according to Peter Singer, you must include the consequences, not only for human beings, but for all conscious creatures.) And you have to do this in an even-handed way, not favouring anyone (or any creature) more than any other.

Strengths of act utilitarianism

Act utilitarianism is the purest form of utilitarianism. As such it may seem to have the most appeal to anyone who is attracted to the utilitarian approach in the first place. It is straightforward in its conception and intuitive: if you want to produce the best consequences in the world, then surely you should act in such a way as to achieve this. Indeed, what other way is there for a utilitarian to proceed if she is serious in her commitment to the theory?

Weaknesses of act utilitarianism

- Unfortunately, though it may be straightforward in its conception, act utilitarianism is very difficult to apply in practice. It is a complex matter to predict the consequences of actions. In many cases, it requires a great deal of knowledge of the characteristic types of consequences of different sorts of actions as well as much reflection on how to apply this knowledge to the given case. Our knowledge is often patchy and we scarcely have the time to do the necessary reflection for every situation in which we find ourselves. Act utilitarianism is, according to this argument, simply impractical.

- The next point is related to the previous one. Precisely because predicting the consequences of actions is so complicated and difficult, there is a danger that we will get it wrong. There is a particular danger of this when the moral decision affects our own important interests. Personal bias may intrude to lead us to choose an action which has inferior consequences for people in general and which is thus not the utilitarianly right act.

- Sometimes, the act which is right according to the act utilitarian rule does not appear to be the morally right act. Suppose you give a promise to help someone. You then judge that the world would be a slightly better place if you broke your promise than if you kept it. As remarked under points 1 and 2 above, such a judgement is often difficult to make and prone to be affected by bias. But that is not the issue here. Even if your judgement was made in a perfectly reasoned and unbiased way, it can still seem that it would be morally wrong to break your promise. It might be said that you have a duty to keep all your promises, irrespective of the consequences of doing so (though we might make an exception when keeping a promise would result in disastrous consequences, e.g., somebody's dying).
Rule utilitarianism

Unlike act utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism does not (normally) apply the principle of maximising good consequences to individual actions. Instead, it looks at general moral rules and asks of each proposed rule whether, supposing everyone adhered to it, good consequences would be maximised. If so, that rule should be adopted. (Rule utilitarians argue that this procedure can be expected to generate the familiar moral rules such as the rule that one should keep one's promises and the rule that one should not kill people.) When deciding what to do, a person should recognise which of the various rules is applicable in her situation and do what the rule tells her to do.

It sometimes happens that more than one rule applies in a given situation, but they give conflicting advice about what to do. For example, the situation may be one in which I can only give vital help to someone by breaking a promise that I have made to someone else. In other words both the rules 'Keep your promises' and 'Always give vital help to people when you can' are in conflict. You cannot obey both and so must decide which to obey. A rule utilitarian may get around this problem by allowing that in such cases you can look at the specific consequences. You would consider whether keeping your promises or giving the help would produce best overall consequences and act accordingly. The theory would still be distinct from act utilitarianism in confining such calculations to cases of conflict between rules—normally it is the rules themselves that have to be applied on the rule utilitarian view. (Another approach would be to decide on a prior ranking of rules, the best ranking being the one that would produce best consequences if everyone adhered to it; the right action is the action that is in accordance with this ranking.)

Strengths of rule utilitarianism

The great strength of rule utilitarianism is that it appears to rectify all the difficulties with act utilitarianism mentioned above:

- It is much easier to apply, as in most cases at least, you only have to know the moral rules and figure out which one applies in your situation. This is within the capacity of most people most of the time.
- It is much less susceptible to the problem of personal bias. This is because the rules are relatively simple and so less susceptible to distortion to fit one's own case.
- If you are a rule utilitarian, you will not violate a moral rule merely because the consequences of doing so would be marginally better than those of keeping it. Moral rules are taken too seriously for that.

Weaknesses of rule utilitarianism

One major criticism of rule utilitarianism (though it has force only for those sympathetic to utilitarianism in general) is that it is not utilitarian enough. This is because it requires you to obey the rule that is generally utilitarianly optimal even in a case where doing so will not produce best consequences. And this may seem irrational, at least in utilitarian terms, especially (as sometimes happens) when others are already violating the rule and you cannot influence them in any way. A critic who takes this line may not be completely against the use of rules. But she may want them to be used as mere ‘rules of thumb’, just aids to determining what the right action is, where the latter is defined in purely act utilitarian terms. Such aids may indeed be useful, given the complexity of
direct utilitarian calculation. But they should not be thought of as supplanting the act utilitarian principle as the genuine criterion of moral right and wrong. And on those occasions when we do know what is the right action in these terms, but it happens not to be in conformity with the generally optimal rule, it would seem crazy to obey the rule rather than do what we know would produce best consequences. (This argument has been urged particularly forcefully by Australian philosopher J.J.C. Smart (1920-2012).)

Let's turn now to the second question identified above: how are we to tell when, and to what extent, consequences are good or bad? There are two main options here: hedonic utilitarianism and preference utilitarianism.

**Hedonic utilitarianism**

In hedonic utilitarianism, the value of consequences is seen in terms of pleasure and pain. The greater the balance of people's degree of pleasure over their degree of pain in a given set of consequences, the better these consequences are judged to be.

**Strengths of hedonic utilitarianism**

Pleasure is almost universally accepted as an intrinsically good thing and pain as an intrinsically bad thing. While it is true that people sometimes sacrifice their own pleasure for the sake of others, it should be recalled that the utilitarian does not propose as the ultimate moral goal for each person the maximisation of *that person's* pleasure, but rather pleasure in general, so such sacrifices may well be in accord with what the utilitarian would require. (If anyone ever sacrifices her own pleasure for the sake of some lesser pleasure for others—and thus fails to maximise general pleasure—the utilitarian will argue that she is not doing what she ought to do.)

**Weaknesses of hedonic utilitarianism**

- It is far from evident that pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the only intrinsically valuable things. Most of us also seek other goals that are generally considered worthy, such as love, friendship, knowledge or artistic beauty. While it is true that such goals are often pursued partly because of the pleasure that they afford, their worth is not normally measured in terms of how much pleasure they give. For example, it might be argued that the best—most valuable—knowledge is that of fundamental truths, not knowledge that gives the greatest amount of pleasure in its contemplation. Even if reading poetry gives less pleasure than playing table tennis, some would argue that reading poetry is intrinsically more worthwhile. These sorts of difficulties with the hedonic view are dramatised in the thought experiment of the 'Experience Machine', devised by American philosopher, Robert Nozick (1938-2002). This is a hypothetical machine which gives the user the illusion of living an excitingly pleasurable life, free from any pain or suffering. (Think of playing a very sophisticated, completely convincing and very long-lasting(!) virtual reality game.) If hedonic utilitarianism is correct, the right thing for us to do would be to hook up to such a machine if it were available. However, many would argue that this would not be right, because there is something intrinsically important about having real achievements and forming relationships with real people.
- It can also be argued that some forms of pleasure lack intrinsic value and are even
intrinsically bad. An example might the pleasures of a sadist. It might also be said by some that certain pains—such as the pain of remorse for a wrong done-- are intrinsically good, or at least that one might adopt the view of the British philosopher G.E. Moore (1873-1958) that the complex consisting of bad behaviour followed by punishment or remorse is intrinsically better than bad behaviour not followed by these things.

- There may be problems quantifying pleasure and pain. These are necessarily subjective experiences. You and I might get different levels of pleasure from the same event and so it is difficult to make the necessary comparisons. It may also be hard to compare the degree of pleasure that I get from one thing X with the degree of pleasure that you get from a different thing Y, judgements which are often essential when applying hedonic utilitarianism. This is called the problem of the interpersonal comparison of utilities.

**Mill on 'qualities of pleasure'**

The objection mentioned above, according to which hedonic utilitarianism seems to require us to play table tennis instead of reading poetry as long as playing table tennis gives more pleasure, was tackled by Mill (though instead of table-tennis, he used the example of a child's game called 'push-pin'). He argued that we should not just consider quantity (or intensity) of pleasure--'quality' is also relevant. Though the less 'cultured' sources of pleasure may give a greater quantity of pleasure, they do not give such a good quality of pleasure as the 'cultured' ones. As long as utilitarianism is stated in such a way as to maximise quality and quantity, there should be no problem according to Mill. But how are we to know which pleasures have the highest quality? Mill's answer was that we should follow the verdict of those who have experienced both kinds of pleasure. Such people, according to Mill, unanimously declare the 'cultured' pleasures to be superior in quality.

It is fair to say, I think, that few people have been impressed with this suggestion of Mill's. Part of the problem is the obscurity of the notion of quality. What exactly is this? 'Higher quality' implies superiority in some respect, but in what respect? This is left unclear in Mill's account. There is admittedly something plausible in the idea that the people best suited to judge between two different sources of pleasure are those who have experienced both. And no doubt such people do usually say that they find the cultured pleasures superior. But why is this? It may be unrealistic to think that their judgement is based on an unbiased assessment of the pleasurable experiences. The cultured sources of pleasure are generally an acquired taste: it takes time and effort to get to appreciate them, that is, to extract the maximum pleasantness obtainable from them. It is surely possible, if not probable, that those who have done so would be reluctant to admit that all this effort had been unnecessary because they could have obtained pleasures just as desirable by less demanding means, such as watching 'X-factor'.

J.J.C. Smart gave what is perhaps a better reason for favouring at least some 'cultured' pleasures. This is that they harmonise better with the utilitarian aim of maximising general happiness. For example, if one enjoys reading history or certain kinds of novels, this may have the additional benefit of teaching one valuable lessons about human beings, which may help one to be a more effective utilitarian in practical terms.

**Preference utilitarianism**

Preference utilitarianism resolves some of the problems surrounding hedonic utilitarianism mentioned above. For the preference utilitarian, the object of morality is to maximise satisfaction of
*basic desires*, that is to say, to maximise the satisfaction of desires that do not depend on other desires. For example, I may have a short-term basic desire to experience the pleasure and comfort of drinking tea or a long-term basic desire to be admired. A non-basic desire exists because of the existence of another desire whose satisfaction it serves. For example, if I didn't like the taste of tea, I might still have a non-basic desire to drink tea, owing to my desire to avoid the discomfort of thirst, to avoid offending my tea-loving friend or whatever. (Such desires are often called *instrumental* desires.) It is only the satisfaction of basic desires that preference utilitarians seek to maximise. This is because non-basic desires may be irrational. (For example, I may have a non-basic desire to consume a great deal of salt in the mistaken belief that this would do me good.)

Like hedonic utilitarianism, preference utilitarianism is focused on universal, not just individual, benefit. What matters is to maximise the satisfaction of people's desires generally, not just the desires of the moral agent herself. This might mean that I could be morally required to choose not to satisfy one of my own desires in order to allow the satisfaction of someone else's stronger desire. (For example, I should not satisfy my desire to play loud music at night-time if this would frustrate someone's stronger desire for sleep.)

**Strengths of preference utilitarianism**

Preference utilitarians find they can deal with some of the objections levelled against hedonic utilitarianism:

- A preference utilitarian need not say that only pleasure and the avoidance of pain are intrinsically valuable things. Since many people have non-basic desires for things other than pleasure and the avoidance of pain, such desires can legitimately be endorsed by the preference utilitarian. (And it should be noted that even in the case of pleasures and pains it is not a question of their intrinsic value or disvalue, as far as the preference utilitarian is concerned—what matters is satisfying the non-basic desires of people to have them or avoid them.)

- It can be argued that a desire is more amenable to objective, empirical investigation than a subjective experience of pleasure or pain. Ultimately, we can determine what people want by looking at their behaviour. We can also (and this is crucial ) determine the *degree* to which people want things. (For example, if I am prepared to risk losing £100 for the sake of getting X, I must want X more strongly than if I am prepared to risk losing only £50.) And although the details get quite technical, it appears that preference utilitarianism can successfully deal with the problem of the interpersonal comparison of utilities mentioned above, because it makes sense to compare the degree to which one person wants X with the degree to which another wants Y.
**Weaknesses of preference utilitarianism**

- Is the satisfaction of a non-basic preference really an intrinsically desirable thing, only ever legitimately to be overridden by the need to satisfy a stronger non-basic preference that conflicts with it? The preference utilitarian seems committed, all other things being equal, to try to satisfy pointless desires for worthless things. In order to overcome this problem, many preference utilitarians include a restriction limiting the range of acceptable to desires to *rational* ones. However, it is not entirely clear that this is effective for all possible 'undesirable desires'. For example, it is not clear that sadistic desires are necessarily irrational.

- Some would argue that certain things, such as love and knowledge are intrinsically valuable whether or not anyone currently desires them. Moore believed this and made it the basis for his distinctive brand of utilitarianism, called *ideal utilitarianism*. The aim of an ideal utilitarian is to maximise the amount of such valuable things in the world, and minimise the amount of bad things, such as hatred and ignorance. (It should be noted that in Moore's day, preference utilitarianism had not been developed: 'utilitarianism' meant to nearly everyone hedonic utilitarianism. But Moore would certainly have rejected preference utilitarianism--along with the hedonic theory--because, like the latter, he would have disagreed with its conception of what counts as intrinsically good.)

**Strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism in general**

**Strengths**

- Perhaps the main strength of utilitarianism is that it provides an attractive motivation for acting morally. This is that by doing so, one will be 'helping to make the world a better place'. There could be few better reasons, it might be said. (Admittedly pursuit of one's personal interests would be even more motivating, but arguably this cannot form the basis of a *moral* outlook.)

- Utilitarianism seems particularly well suited to morally informed decision-making by governments and similar organisations with jurisdiction over substantial numbers of people. In fact it has often been applied, in one form or another, by actual governments. It seems entirely reasonable to make such decisions based on an assessment of how much overall happiness or well-being would be created by each alternative policy or action.

- Utilitarianism makes somewhat less appeal to intuition than some other theories (particularly deontology—see below). It thus appears to be more 'objective'. The assessment of which actions are right is not left to subjective intuition, but carried out by a systematic test—does it maximise expected utility? ('Utility' is the term often used for well-being or happiness or whatever utilitarianism is intended to maximise—hence the name of the theory.)

**Weaknesses**

- Some people think that utilitarians have a tough time accounting for *rights*. Consider the following much-discussed thought experiment. Suppose there are three hospital patients. The first needs a new kidney, the second a new liver and the third a new heart. They can all...
be saved if they get these organs. Doctors can kill me and extract these organs to give to them, thereby saving three lives with the loss of only one. The balance of utility seems to favour this, but at the expense of violating my right to life. A more plausible example (also much discussed) is the case a small community that is being torn apart by a particular sort of violent crime; the authorities urgently need to prevent further cases, but none of the real culprits can be caught. So they frame an innocent man and punish him severely to deter everyone else. Their decision might well be regarded as correct in utilitarian terms. (But note that rule utilitarianism may have less difficulty with rights than act utilitarianism, since the right to life, for example, could be construed as based on the rule: 'Thou shalt not kill', a principle that the rule utilitarian will not wish to violate except in very rare cases.)

- Utilitarianism seems to conflict with the ideal of moral integrity. As we saw earlier, act utilitarians, at least, may think themselves obliged to break a promise if the consequences of doing so would be even marginally better than the consequences of keeping it. But people with such a fragile sense of commitment could hardly be described as having integrity. (To underline the point, note that the person to whom the promise was made might not even be the one who benefits by the decision to break it.) Let's remember the literal meaning of the word 'integrity': wholeness. Some writers have emphasised the damage that act utilitarianism apparently does to the 'wholeness' of the self. If each of my actions has to be decided according to an entirely new utilitarian calculation based on the situation facing me at the time, how can I remain committed to any particular set of aims or ideals? As a person, I would seem to be 'fragmented', lacking wholeness or unity. Again, it may be that rule utilitarianism is more defensible on this matter than act utilitarianism, for the former, unlike the latter, does not require each decision to be made by a direct utilitarian calculation, but permits general moral rules of a sort that would be approved by the defender of moral integrity. On the other hand, even on the rule utilitarian view, if it happened to be the case that rules flouting moral integrity had greater expected utility than rules respecting it, then the former would have to be chosen by the conscientious utilitarian. It could be argued that this makes the basis of moral integrity too contingent: integrity needs to be respected under all possible circumstances.

As the previous two points have shown, when discussing the weaknesses of utilitarianism, it is important to be aware that not all versions of the theory are equally vulnerable. Rule utilitarianism often seems to escape objections that bedevil the more extreme theory of act utilitarianism or at least to hold out greater promise of resisting them. Similarly, many find preference utilitarianism more plausible than hedonic utilitarianism, for reasons discussed earlier.

3. Deontology

Deontology is the ethics of moral duty. And moral duty is defined as conformity to one or more rules which people can perceive to be reasonable, rational or intuitively right. Deontologists are often also concerned with rights. This is not surprising as duties and rights are often said to be correlated in the following sense. If I have a right not to be killed, for example, then other people have a duty not to kill me. And because the duties recognised by deontologists are regarded by them as binding (the only situation where we may be 'relieved' of one of our duties is when one duty clashes with another and so it is impossible to do all of them), it follows that rights are are also binding--no grounds would justify the violation of anyone's rights except where respecting one person's rights would necessitate violating another's.

The most famous deontologist was the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). We will
look at his system, as well as a more recent theory, that of the Scottish philosopher, W.D. Ross (1877-1971).

**Kant's system**

One of the most important features of Kant's system is that it puts *motivation* at centre stage. An act has no moral value unless it is done with a 'good will' and this entails that it is done for duty's sake. To count as morally acceptable, an act must have no other purpose but that of doing one's duty, or at least this must be its overriding purpose. This, Kant thinks, is a type of motivation that is based on reason and not on feelings. So if, for example, you helped starving people simply because you felt sorry for them, that would not count as an acceptable motivation from a moral point of view. You would only be acting in a morally correct way if it was your duty to help them and you were doing it *because* you perceived it to be your duty. (You might have other reasons as well, but the wish to do your duty must be the overriding one—if, for some reason, it had been your moral duty *not* to help them, you would not have done so.)

But how do we know what our moral duties are? In this connection, Kant distinguishes between two kinds of 'imperatives': *hypothetical* and *categorical*. Hypothetical imperatives are based on the wish or need to satisfy certain goals. They always have (at least implicitly) a condition attached to them relating to the goal or goals in question, for example: 'If you want to get to Wickford, take the first turning on the right' or 'If you want to bring up a child to be a good person, set a good example to them'. In contrast, a categorical imperative has no such condition attached to it, as it is independent of any specific goals. It is thus supposed to apply to any rational being, irrespective of whatever goals they might have. Ultimately, Kant thinks there is only one valid categorical imperative from which all our particular moral duties are derived, though he states it in several different ways. Here is his first formulation of the Categorical Imperative:

“Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”

To explain how this rule works, let us consider a practical example. Suppose I am considering making a promise that I have no intention of keeping so as to please someone. I want to know if this is morally acceptable. Here are the stages of reasoning that the Categorical Imperative requires me to work through together with their likely results:

1. Work out the maxim to which the proposed action of making the mendacious promise corresponds. As my reason for making it would be to please someone, the maxim must be: “Whenever it is necessary to please someone, make a promise (irrespective of whether you have any intention of keeping it)”.
2. Consider whether it is possible or conceivable that this maxim should become a universal law, that is, whether it could be that *everyone* on all relevant occasions follows this maxim. Arguably, this could not happen because in such a scenario, trying to make a credible promise would be impossible. Nobody would trust you to stick with it, as such fake promises would be so common. In fact, in this scenario, *there would be no promising*. Although people might say 'I promise' to do this and that, it would be just a sham. Because there would be no such thing as promising, the proposed maxim would be impossible to apply.
3. Because of the contradiction described in (2), the proposed maxim is incoherent and thus the corresponding action would be morally wrong, that is to say: you should not make a promise that you have no intention of keeping just to please someone.

This reasoning appears very abstract and rather complex, but it does have echoes in at least some cases of actual moral reasoning. It is not unusual for people to object to a proposed action with the question “What if everyone did that?” and it is reasonable to think of Kant as attempting to put such objections on a more formal footing.

The duties generated by the Categorical Imperative are believed by Kant to be absolute. For example, the duty not make a mendacious promise admits of no exceptions whatsoever, not even situations where people's lives are at stake.

The above principle (the 'universal law' principle) is not Kant's only way of stating his Categorical Imperative. He has several other ways, one of which (the 'Humanity' principle) reads as follows:

“We should never act in such a way that we treat Humanity, whether in ourselves or in others, as a means only but always as an end in itself.”

This looks very much like another categorical imperative, rather than a reformulation of the universal law principle. It is an important question in Kantian studies whether, and in what sense, Kant was right to regard it as the same principle stated in a different way, as opposed to a distinct moral rule. But let's not be waylaid by this. It is clearly, in any case, an interesting principle and one that has commended itself to many moralists who emphasise human dignity and human rights. But what exactly does it mean? It surely cannot be telling us that we must never use people to further our own ends. We do that all the time and it is absurd to think it wrong. For example, every time I get my hair cut or order something from the Internet I am using people to serve my own personal ends. But the critical point is Kant's use of the word 'only'. I may indeed use others as a means to my personal ends, but I must not be relating to them solely in this way. This implies that my transactions with others must be based on respect for the autonomy or freedom of the other person (for example, in being subject to agreements or contracts that are open and perceived by all parties to be reasonable). One practical consequence of this would be (arguably) that companies should not exploit their workers, but should treat them decently. The principle also seems to place significant and very defensible constraints on how rulers treat their citizens and indeed how the powerful ought to treat the weak in general.

**Strengths and weaknesses of Kant's moral theory**

**Strengths**

- Kant's emphasis on the importance of motives in morality seems right. It is hard to see how an action can have moral value unless it is done with good motives.
- The universal law formulation of Kant's categorical imperative seems to capture an important element of moral reasoning, as it is arguably right to say that no action could be morally right if it would not be possible for everyone to follow it. After all, morality is supposed to make the same basic demands of everyone.
- The humanity formulation of the categorical imperative is a powerful expression of the crucial moral importance of respect for other people.
Weaknesses

- It is often remarked that Kant's ethics seem too cerebral, too much a matter of rational calculation and insufficiently related to feelings or emotions. For example, it seems wrong to suppose that our moral rejection of cruelty has nothing to do with our feeling sorry for its victims and only a matter of whether it conforms to some abstract principle.

- That the duties derived from the Categorical Imperative are absolute is hard to accept. It is surely wrong to think that the moral injunction against telling lies, for example, is not subject to some exceptions. Notoriously, Kant thought that even if the only way to save someone's life was to tell a lie, one should still tell the truth. This seems quite mistaken.

- The universal law version of the categorical principle seems too limited to generate the full range of moral obligations that we are supposed to have. While it seems to work well for certain kinds of situations involving promises and lies, it is hard to derive from it most other moral 'oughts'. In what sense, for example, is the wrongness of being unkind to people based on it? If we imagine the possible maxim of being unkind to people whenever it suits us universalised so that it is supposed to apply to everyone, we may be imagining a very unpleasant situation, but it is a logically possible situation and that is supposed to be enough for it to pass Kant's test.

A more recent deontology: the ethics of W.D. Ross

Because Kant's system is so uncompromising, it is worth looking at another system of deontological ethics, that developed by W.D. Ross, which many will find more reasonable. According to Ross, we have a range of prima facie duties, which are self-evident to sufficiently mature people. These are things we ought or ought not to do, all other things being equal. (Duties of this kind have also been referred to as 'pro tanto' or 'presumptive duties.) For example, we have a prima facie duty to tell the truth. This means, not that we have to tell the truth in every possible situation (as Kant thought), but that we should tell the truth when there is no sufficiently good positive reason not to. And how do we tell if there is a sufficiently good positive reason to violate a prima facie duty? Well, as we remarked in the introduction to this section, people's duties sometimes clash, so that it is impossible to follow one without violating another. For example we have a prima facie duty to keep our promises, but we also have a prima facie duty to help others in distress when the cost to ourselves is not too great. Suppose I have promised to meet someone somewhere at 2 o'clock. But on the way, with very little time to spare, I come upon another person who has just been involved in an accident and I am the only person who can help. Here the prima facie duty to keep promises clashes with the prima facie duty to give help—I cannot fulfil both and so must choose which one I ought morally to adhere to.

The above example illustrates the fact that we cannot manage with the concept of a prima facie duty alone. We also have to have the concept of a person's duty 'full stop' (or duty tout court as it is sometimes called). This is what I really ought to do and where there is a clash, it can correspond to only one of the two or more clashing prima facie duties. But how are we to know in such cases which prima facie duty to follow? Ross does not say a great deal about this, but he does suggest that, unlike our knowledge of our prima facie duties, it is often far from self-evident, but requires careful reflection. Some of this reflection will be about the consequences of our possible actions. Consideration of the actual consequences of an action is usually contrasted with the deontological approach, which is concerned with right acts and the motivation for them. If this is right, then Ross is not a very pure deontologist. In fact, he believes that we have a whole class of prima facie duties
that are directed towards maximising the amount of good in the world. And within this class there are some significant subdivisions:

- There are duties of *beneficence*, that is, duties of doing good for others, working for their greater virtue, intelligence or happiness.
- There are also duties of *non-malificence*, of not doing positive harm to others.
- Thirdly, there are duties of *self-improvement*, working for our own greater intelligence, virtue or happiness.
- And finally, there are duties of *justice*, which involve working towards a distribution of happiness in accordance with virtue (so that when the total amount of happiness is limited, the virtuous receive more than the vicious).

The more traditionally 'deontological' duties, which do not have to do with maximising good consequences, arise, according to Ross, out of the special situations that people find themselves in vis-a-vis others. These include:

- Duties of fidelity, that is of fulfilling expectations created in others. (The most obvious of these would be the keeping of an explicit promise.)
- Duties of Reparation, that is of making up for wrongs that we have done to others.
- Duties of Gratitude, that is acting in acknowledgement of benefits that others have given us.

So Ross differs from the utilitarians, not by denying the existence of a duty to create goodness in an impartial way, but in maintaining that this is not our *only prima facie* duty. (But note also that Ross recognises other kinds of goodness besides happiness—such as virtue and knowledge—and he thinks that, not only the *amount* of happiness in the world is important, but also its distribution according to people's deserts, conceived in terms of virtue; this too differentiates Ross from standard utilitarianism.)

Finally, Ross introduces an important distinction between *right acts* and *good actions*. The right act is the one that we have a duty to perform. A good action is one that is not only a right act, but one that is done *from a sense of duty*. Since we cannot determine our motives (they arise from our individual character, over which we generally have no control) it is not our duty to do good actions but only right acts. But of course we should feel more pleased when someone does the right act from a sense of duty (and thus does a *good action*) than when they do a right act from a motive that is morally indifferent or bad. And indeed, we have a *prima facie* duty to try to cultivate a sense of duty in ourselves and encourage it in others. (The former would be one of our duties of self-improvement and the latter, one of our duties of beneficence.)

4. Virtue ethics

*Its key features*

Virtue ethics originated with Aristotle (384 BC–322 BC) and can also be seen to some extent in Hume’s theories of morality (though there are also strains of utilitarianism in Hume). In Anglo-American moral philosophy for most of the last century, the debate (when it was not purely about moral language) was almost entirely between utilitarians and deontologists and it was only from the late 1950s that virtue ethics slowly began to become prominent again, to the point where it is now
seen as a major rival to the two more traditional theories.

Let’s now take a brief look at the virtue ethics developed by the New Zealand-based philosopher, Rosalind Hursthouse, as it’s fairly typical.

For Hursthouse, a virtue is a rather complex thing. For example, the virtue of honesty is not just a disposition to do honest things—to tell the truth, to avoid cheating and so on—because a person might behave in these ways purely for their own personal gain. To have the virtue of honesty, you have to value truth and fair play for their own sake; you have to do the honest thing because it is honest. Also, she calls virtues multi-track dispositions, which means that they affect a range of emotional reactions, choices, values, desires and perceptions. For example, an honest person:

…chooses, where possible to work with honest people, to have honest friends, to bring up her children to be honest. She disapproves of, dislikes, deplors dishonesty, is not amused by certain tales of chicanery, despises or pities those who succeed by dishonest means rather than thinking they have been clever, is unsurprised, or pleased (as appropriate) when honesty triumphs, is shocked or distressed when those near and dear to her do what is dishonest and so on. (Hursthouse, 'Virtue Ethics'.)

This all sounds very high-minded and some of us might wonder whether we actually make the grade. But fortunately, Hursthouse allows that possessing a virtue is a matter of degree. If some of those things are true of us some of the time, we count as people who are honest to an extent, but only those for whom all these things are true all of the time get full marks and can call themselves ‘fully virtuous’. Unlike most of us, the fully virtuous never feel ‘conflicted’. They’re not even tempted to do a vicious thing. This is the ideal, but those of us who do get tempted and manage to overcome our temptations at least get credit for defeating our baser urges. Another way in which people can fall short of full virtue, Hursthouse says, is through lacking phronesis, a Greek word meaning something like ‘practical wisdom’. Practical wisdom enables us to see how we can overcome conflicts between what different virtues seem to ask of us, for example, whether to be honest in telling someone a painful truth, or be dishonest but kind in hiding the truth. Practical wisdom requires wide experience of life, particularly of the likely consequences of different actions. (Hursthouse thinks that because of their relatively limited experience of life, adolescents don’t have much practical wisdom in general, but I would imagine that she would acknowledge that there are exceptions, particularly perhaps young people who are forced to a certain emotional maturity sooner than normal by having big responsibilities thrust on them.) This point about consequences may remind us of utilitarianism, but it is important to note that practical reason is not the possession of a formal 'decision procedure' (i.e. a series of rules that could in principle be applied by a machine) such as that which forms the basis of act utilitarianism. It enables us to make informed, rational decisions in a way that is reflective and thoughtful (at least when time permits) but which is not the result of a mechanistic algorithm.

Hursthouse, like many virtue ethicists, makes much use of the Greek term eudaimonia, which we can roughly translate as ‘flourishing’. The flourishing life for a human being is a good life, the way her life ought to go. And the link between eudaimonia and virtue is simply that in order to achieve eudaimonia, you have to be virtuous and to achieve it fully, you have to be fully virtuous in the sense explained earlier. This implies that a life devoted to having as much fun as possible or to getting as wealthy as you possibly can would not be a life of eudaimonia, even if it was a happy life. So eudaimonia is different from happiness. It’s a less neutral idea, more value-laden.
'Agent-based' and 'agent-focused' theories

In relation to right and wrong action, there is an important distinction to be made between two kinds of virtue ethical theories. Michael Slote calls them agent-focused and agent-based theories. The distinction is about the right answer to this question: to do the right thing, is it enough to do what a virtuous person would do or must you do it because you yourself are virtuous? To explain this, Slote draws on an example from the Victorian utilitarian philosopher, Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900). Sidgwick imagined a lawyer wondering whether to prosecute a suspect. Suppose the facts of the case and the law are such that this suspect should in fact be prosecuted. (He definitely did it and it's definitely illegal.) But suppose also the lawyer happens to intensely dislike this particular suspect. If he prosecutes, he will be doing so out of malice, not out of respect for the law. On the view that all that is needed for right action is to do what a virtuous person would do (the agent-focused view), the lawyer has acted rightly, even though he didn’t do it for a morally acceptable reason. But on the view that to act rightly you must manifest virtue in your actions and so you must have the right sort of motive (the agent-based view), the lawyer acted wrongly. Now that might seem like a strange position because it may sound as if the agent-based theorist wants to say that the lawyer shouldn’t have prosecuted, whereas we agreed that, given the facts of the case and the legal realities, that was his obligation. But the agent-based theorist wouldn’t say that the lawyer shouldn’t prosecute. He would say that to act rightly, he would have to prosecute, but that that wouldn’t be enough. He would have to be doing it for the right motive—for example, because he wants to do his duty as a lawyer—and not because he wants to harm someone.

Hursthouse’s theory is only agent-focused. If you do what a virtuous person would do, you act rightly. But, as we saw, Hursthouse believes (and most virtue ethicists would probably agree with her on this), that there is more to being virtuous than just doing the right things and avoiding the wrong ones. If you avoid doing wrong things for purely selfish reasons, for example, you can’t be regarded as fully virtuous because your motives are of the wrong sort. But if you do the right things for the right motives, you meet a higher standard within Hursthouse’s system. In contrast to this, agent-based theories recognise only the higher standard. Acts of promise-keeping and kindness have no moral worth if they don’t spring from the right motives. I have to say that agent-based theories seem more in accord with the spirit of virtue ethics. We may think it a good thing if people keep their promises and tell the truth even when they do so for purely selfish reasons, but this is likely to be because we think that promise-keeping and truth-telling makes for a more cohesive society in general (i.e., utilitarian reasons), not because it has moral value in the sort of terms that would be recognised by virtue ethics.

Application of virtue ethics

There is a general impression that many people have that virtue ethics cannot make practical recommendations about what to do in real-life situations. The point is often put by saying that virtue ethics tells us not what to do but how to be. It may also be felt that telling people 'how to be' makes little sense, for none of us can choose what sort of character we are to have, nor what sort of motives we are to act on. The problem is more acute for agent-based theories than it is for agent-focused theories. The agent-focused ones at least incorporate the 'lower' moral standard, which we can satisfy just by doing what a virtuous person would do, even if we aren’t actually virtuous ourselves. For the agent-based theorist, on the other hand, there is only the higher standard, which requires not just doing the right thing, but also doing it with the right sort of motive, the problem being of course that we don’t choose our motives when we act.
But I think this problem is a red herring. There is a sense in which I can choose my motive when I act. Of course, I can’t choose the motive independently of the act. That is to say, it could never happen that I know I’m going to help someone, for example, and then make it the case that I do so out of kindness instead of self-interest. This is because if I really know I’m going to help them (that is, prior to making any decision), I won’t be able to choose to help them (let alone choose my motive for helping them), as the matter will already be settled. But what I can sometimes do is choose the motive that is going to prevail with me in the process of choosing the act. For example, if I’m already leaning towards helping someone, but hesitating because of the effort required, I could let my thoughts dwell on how needy they are, which might lead to my desire to help triumphing over my desire to avoid effort, with the result that I go ahead and help. And this amplification of the effect of certain motives could also be brought about by someone else’s recommendation that I dwell on the relevant thoughts or maybe investigate the situation further with a view to trying to get a certain motive to win out in my mind. This point also helps us to deal with the objection that we don’t choose the way we are. This may be true, but we don’t need to do this in order to be able to respond to moral recommendations. Admittedly, I don’t choose to be the sort of person who would respond in a certain way to a certain recommendation. But the important point is that I can (often) respond. That’s enough for moral advice to be a potentially useful thing within the context of virtue ethics. (Note that this is not affected by the issue of determinism either. Only a fairly weak, Humean, conception of free-will and choice are needed for these points to go through. Of course, the virtue ethicist's take on moral responsibility also needs to be considered, but that is another matter.)

**Slote on empathy and its implications**

In order to underline the point about the practical applicability of virtue ethics, this section presents a discussion, from the viewpoint of virtue ethics, of the extent of our obligations to needy and suffering people who live in far-off places and have no direct connection to us. In fact, I want to look at how the U.S.-based philosopher, Michael Slote tackles this issue from the standpoint of his theory of caring and empathy. According to Slote, an act is right—that is, morally O.K.—when it doesn’t exhibit a lack of caring and wrong when it does. Just to be clear: an act doesn’t have to be caring to be morally O.K. Slote uses the example of brushing your teeth, which is morally O.K. because it doesn’t exhibit any lack of caring, unlike, say, hitting someone, which generally does. And Slote thinks he can ground the moral importance of caring in the idea of empathy, the ability that most people have at least to some degree to put themselves in another’s shoes and imagine their pleasure or pain. Basically, Slote thinks that an uncaring act is one whose agent shows less empathy than is normal for human beings.

Before we can understand what Slote has to say about the issue of our obligations to distant others, we need to look at the views of Peter Singer, because Slote is trying to tackle a problem exposed by Singer’s work. Singer has become famous as a defender of the view that if we are fully moral, we need to take into account the interests of non-human animals as much as those of human beings. But Singer has also had some controversial things to say about the question of how much we should be helping suffering people in the world who live far from us and whom we know little about. In fact, he believes that we have as strong an obligation to help such people as we have to help a child drowning before our very eyes. Distance and lack of connection make no difference. All that matters is the need. And as everyone would agree that we have a very strong obligation to help a child drowning before our very eyes (assuming we are able to), it would follow that we have very strong obligations to help the hungry and destitute in far-off countries, for the level of need is similar in the two cases. In fact, Singer maintains that we ought to give to the needy, irrespective of
where they are and how much we’re personally connected to them, up to the point where we are left with only the necessities that we require to live—which is of course a morally very demanding position.

But then again these are the views that you would expect of a pure utilitarian. Utilitarianism, as we saw, aims at optimising consequences for everyone who might be affected by our actions and when we consider the impact that they have on people (and possibly non-human animals), no-one counts as more important than anyone else. In consequence of this, the only thing that could justify greater moral concern on this view would be greater need.

Now empathy is often thought to be the key emotion in utilitarian morality, grounding the principle of utility maximisation. But Slote believes that a proper appeal to empathy will help us avoid the idea—objectionable to many—that we have as strong an obligation to help unfortunate people in far-off places as we have to help a child drowning before our very eyes. Why? Precisely because of the implications of the phrase 'before our very eyes'. We can see and hear the child in trouble, but we can’t see and hear the person in a far-off country. (Of course we may be able to see and hear them on T.V., a point whose implications we’ll explore in a moment.) And seeing and hearing as well as other forms of perception are crucial here, since, when a person can actually perceive another’s suffering, they are more likely to empathise with them. So according to Slote, it is worse not to help the drowning child than it is not to help the distant unperceived sufferer, because a person who perceives a drowning child and doesn’t help must be unduly lacking in empathy (i.e., have less than the normal amount), whereas this wouldn’t necessarily be true of someone who doesn’t give any help to an unperceived sufferer. Still less would it have to be true of someone who refuses to make big sacrifices to help unperceived sufferers, so Singer’s extreme conclusion that we are all obliged to do this is avoided. Of course someone might do it because she had a capacity for empathy that was stronger than the norm, but such a person would be doing more than her moral duty. Her action would have a great deal of moral value, but it wouldn’t be the kind of action that could reasonably be required of anyone. She would have done what ethicists call a supererogatory act: something ‘morally heroic’.

But what about the point noted above concerning our ability to use technology to perceive people in very distant places? One thinks here of the footage of famines brought to our T.V. screens, often inspiring charitable giving on a mass scale. Now I think Slote would regard the means of perception as irrelevant. It doesn’t matter whether we see through the unassisted operation of our eyes or via technology. The point is that the vision or perception can be just as good in either case and so can give rise to a high degree of empathy in the viewer. So I think he would say that if you see the T.V. images of the famines and don’t give some help, then there is something wrong with you, morally speaking, just as there would be if you failed to help the drowning child you directly see. But given the extent of the need, one might ask why we aren’t morally required to give the sort of extraordinary levels of help recommended by Singer when we can see the T.V. images? Presumably this is because our readiness to act is affected not only by our empathy, but by other factors as well. In particular, our very awareness that if we gave that much help, we would be sacrificing so much inhibits us from doing this. That explains why not helping to the extent demanded by Singer is compatible with having a normal level of empathy and so is not morally wrong, even when we directly see or otherwise perceive the people we would be helping.

Slote also discusses another kind of case. Suppose some miners are trapped in a mine because of an accident. What are our obligations in such a case? According to Charles Fried in his book An Anatomy of Values, if resources are scarce it would be better to use them to install safety devices to prevent such disasters in the future than to use them to help get these miners out, as more lives
would be saved in the long run and he thinks that we should be prepared to tell the trapped miners this in person. Slote disagrees. If we’re forced to choose, he says, we must choose in favour of helping the miners who are already trapped right now. I guess most people would agree with him. But how could this position be justified? Again, Slote appeals to the idea of empathy. But in this case, it is not necessarily going to be empathy inspired by perception of the individuals concerned. True, we might be able to see T.V. pictures of the trapped miners, but suppose that isn’t the case. Surely it would still be right to help them rather than the potential victims of future possible accidents (assuming we can’t do both). Why? Because of what Slote calls the ‘immediacy factor’. These actual miners are facing clear and present danger, while the potential victims of future accidents are not. And immediacy, even without perception, tends to increase empathy. In other words, we’re more likely to empathise with those we think of as being in clear and present danger than with those we don’t, all other things being equal.

One can imagine both Singer and Fried being quite unconvinced by Slote’s theory. Singer might say: why isn’t it just a matter of one person’s need as compared with another’s? If the other person’s need for assistance is greater than my need for whatever I would have to give up, then surely I should provide that assistance. And Fried might say that if we are concerned, not with people in greater need necessarily, but with more people in the future with similar levels of need, then our obligation is to the larger number. But I think Slote’s response would be that while it might be desirable in some sense for the person with the greater need to get what he needs or for the greater number to get what they need, this desirability doesn’t in itself create a moral obligation. For that, it needs to be shown that it would be uncaring not to give it to them, as determined by the standard of normal levels of empathy. Because of this distinction between, on the one hand, what it would be desirable to happen and, on the other, what it would be right or wrong for someone to do, I don’t think Slote’s approach can be dismissed so easily.

Critics of Slote might try another line of attack, though. They might point out that people can’t usually control their general capacity to feel empathy and if someone happens to be less given to empathy than most others and as a result does things that are uncaring by that standard, it’s not their fault and it would be unfair to criticise them morally for it. This reflects what might be thought to be a general objection to agent-based virtue theories: that in judging people’s actions by reference to what sort of people these actions demonstrate them to be, they judge unfairly, as we can’t help being the sort of people we are. But Slote could answer this by arguing that fairness or unfairness is related to the way in which we treat people and that the question of whether a person has acted rightly or wrongly is different from the question of how we should treat that person, although they’re clearly connected. In an agent-based virtue theory such as Slote’s, the question of whether we should treat others in certain ways is a matter of what sort of people our treating them in those ways would reveal us to be. In Slote’s particular theory, it is a matter of whether, or to what extent, we would be revealed as caring people. For example, if we’re considering criticising someone for an uncaring act, we’d have to consider whether it would be caring or uncaring to criticise him. And we might well decide that it was uncaring to criticise someone for lacking empathy when no conceivable good would be likely to result from doing so for the simple reason that he had no way to make himself more susceptible to empathy than he currently was.
**Strengths and weaknesses of virtue ethics**

**Strengths**

- In comparison with utilitarianism, virtue ethics seems more in tune with our usual ways of thinking about morality. For example:

  1. It gives due weight to important virtues such as integrity. (See above for the problems that utilitarians typically have with integrity.)
  2. Some forms of virtue ethics (particularly agent-based theories) give more weight to intentions than utilitarianism does. For the latter, one does the morally right thing merely by choosing the act with best consequences (in act utilitarianism at least), but the agent-based virtue ethicist insists that, insofar as morality has to do with consequences at all, moral rightness depends on having the intention of making things better. And this may be thought to accord more with our ordinary moral thinking, for morality seems to be essentially bound up with intention and character.
  3. Suppose I act to benefit myself personally and there is nothing else I could have done that would have benefited myself or anyone else more. Then, according to the (act) utilitarian, I have acted morally. But this does not seem right, as it appears that my action has no particular moral value—it would only have such value if it were benefiting others without any gains (or fewer gains) for me. Virtue ethics seems superior to utilitarianism in giving due emphasis to the moral importance of altruism.

- Virtue ethics may seem superior to Kantian deontology in that the latter might be said to give excessive weight to the idea of duty. Virtue ethics can accommodate other motivations besides the wish to do one's duty. This is clear from Hursthouse's idea of virtues as multi-track dispositions as well as from Slote's appeal to the concept of empathy.

**Weaknesses**

- The idea of a virtue or vice is a rather culturally variable one. For example, some cultures have given more weight to qualities such as physical courage or chastity than ours does. How are we to decide which virtues are genuine ones? Or is it that all virtues are actually relative to societies or cultures?—in which case, virtue ethics might be thought to lack the objectivity which many expect from a moral theory.
- Granted what we said above about virtue ethics not being irrelevant to action, it may still be felt that a system like utilitarianism, which provides a decision procedure for deciding which acts are right and wrong is more likely to lead to moral agreement than one which (uncritically, it might be said) accepts the intrinsic value of a wide variety of virtues.

**5. Application of the theories**

**Introduction**

In this section I want to look at a real-life ethical problem from the standpoint of each of the moral theories examined above. The issue that I want to consider is abortion. We will look at how an
advocate of each of the three theories would approach this issue and what their conclusions might be. These discussions are not meant to be definitive. In each case, there is much more that could be said both in favour of, and against, abortion.

**Utilitarianism**

As we saw, the utilitarian's view is that the criterion of right and wrong is based on examining the goodness or badness of consequences that might result from a given action, rule or policy. This might make it appear that the utilitarian can deal straightforwardly—in principle at least—with any real-life issue, including that of abortion. And even though there is the practical difficulty of obtaining all the necessary information about likely consequences, as long as we construe rightness as having to do with *expected* consequences, rather than with what actually happens, even this does not seem to invalidate the utilitarian approach or make it unfeasible.

However, this optimism on behalf of utilitarianism is perhaps misjudged. First of all, we must remember that in order to state the utilitarian view precisely, we need to decide *whose* good or bad is to be aimed at or avoided respectively. The most common answer is the good and bad of all human beings, with no-one to count for more than any other. But why limit it to that? As Bentham pointed out (more recently echoed by Singer and others), animals are able to suffer and feel pleasure, so why shouldn't their interests also be taken into account in the utilitarian calculation? And this issue is particularly important in the abortion question because of the status of the foetus. The foetus is undoubtedly human—it has human DNA, after all. But its status is not quite like that of a human being that has already been born. Indeed, in the very earliest moments of pregnancy, it is little different in its biological nature from a primitive life form such as a bacterium, to which it would make little sense (presumably) to attribute pain and suffering. Of course, as the foetus develops, this changes. It acquires ever more sophisticated, ever more person-like qualities (and much faster than perhaps once suspected before the days of ultrasound and similar techniques), so that just before birth it is a fully-fledged baby 'waiting to come out'. At that point to leave it out of consideration from the utilitarian point of view would seem arbitrary and unjust.

The problem of course is that there is no precise known point at which it becomes necessary to treat the foetus/unborn baby as deserving such consideration. Even if the ability to feel pleasure and pain is used as the criterion, then the problem is a very real one, because of the difficulty in knowing when a developing foetus becomes capable of being in these states (though it is possible that empirical research may throw some light on this). But if (as preference utilitarians might require), it is necessary to know whether the foetus has *preferences or wishes*, then we may be dealing with facts that it is sometimes impossible to determine even in principle. That is to say, though just before birth it may be a definite fact that the foetus/unborn baby has preferences (e.g. to stay where it is or to be born) and in the moments after conception it may be a definite fact that it doesn't, there are many moments (perhaps the bulk of those constituting the pregnancy) when nobody could determine this even in principle.

There is another sort of consideration relating to the foetus that needs attention. This has to do, not with the way it is now, but with what it has the potential to be if the abortion does not happen. If there is no abortion, the foetus will (in most cases) be born and become a fully-fledged person. What value should the utilitarian attach to the life that it will have? This depends of course on many factors. Sometimes it is argued that abortion should take place for the sake of the foetus itself, or for the sake of the child it would otherwise become, if it is thought that this life would not be a good one (for example if the child would be severely disabled). On the other hand, for the abortion to be
justified from the point of view of the foetus, it would have to be a very bad one indeed. Even a difficult and hard life might still be better than no life at all, as long as it provided at least some moments of happiness.

It is clear than, that even if we consider the matter from the point of view of the foetus alone, applying the utilitarian theory is no easy matter. If we then bring in other people who are or could be affected by the action, the situation is hardly improved, but of course we can hardly avoid doing this. Most notably, of course, we must consider the effect on the mother's well-being of continuing with the pregnancy or having the abortion. Depending on the situation, this may range from a missed career opportunity to death, with many levels of discomfort or suffering in between. Obviously, the more suffering that is associated with bringing the pregnancy to term, the easier it is to justify the abortion from a utilitarian perspective and vice-versa.

**Deontology**

Deontologists look at moral issues in terms of duties and rights rather than consequences. In the case of duties, the duty not to kill seems relevant, but again the special status of the foetus complicates the matter. Conventional morality certainly instructs us not to kill people, but, for reasons already discussed, in early pregnancy at least, it is not clear that the foetus is a person. Nor is the injunction against killing necessarily the only one relevant here. Perhaps there is also a duty not to knowingly bring an unwanted child into the world, or a child that will, due to extreme disabilities, have a very miserable life. In other words, even if we are deontologists, it does not follow that we are necessarily confined to some traditional list of duties like the ten commandments —there may be others worthy of consideration (though of course, if there are, that makes the question more complicated from a philosophical point of view). Note that the more (prima facie) duties we recognise, the more likely it is that those applicable to cases of abortion will conflict, forcing us to choose between them.

But deontology is not only about duties; it is also about rights. And one right in particular is often cited in this situation—the woman's right to control her own body. This appears to clash with another frequently cited right, the foetus's (or baby's) right to life, its right not to be killed, although the latter appears to depend (as we have seen) on whether the foetus is a person. American philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson (b. 1929) argues, however, that even if the foetus is a person, it does not follow that it should not be killed, since the right not to be killed is, when stated properly, the right not to be killed unjustly and the killing of a foetus is not necessarily unjust. To show this, Thomson presents the following thought experiment:

You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you--we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist is now plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you." Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation?
As Thomson points out, most of us will agree that although it would be very nice for you to let yourself continue to be hooked up to the violinist in this way in order to save his life, you would not be morally obligated to do so. Certainly, to disconnect the violinist would be to kill him, but it would not be an unjust killing, according to Thomson. The analogy with unwanted pregnancies should be obvious. And so we should conclude, Thomson thinks, that a pregnant woman is not obligated to continue with her pregnancy if she does not wish to.

It is clear just from this limited discussion that there is no obvious single ‘deontological answer’ to the abortion question. It depends on how all the relevant duties and rights are weighed against each other.

**Virtue ethics**

Finally, what would a virtue ethicist have to say about the morality of abortion? I want to look at what Hursthouse has to say about this subject in an article she published in the journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs* in 1991 (‘Virtue Theory and Abortion’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (3): 223-246). We’ve already looked briefly at Hursthouse’s conception of virtue ethics in general. What are her thoughts on the application of virtue ethics to this particular problem?

First of all, she tells us that she doesn’t want to ‘solve’ the problem of abortion, nor does she want to tell people what they ought to do. Rather, she wants to reveal how virtue ethics would direct us to think about the issue. I think we should be careful how we take these statements. It will become clear, I think, that what she means is that she doesn’t want to tell women in general who may be contemplating having an abortion either that they should or should not go ahead. Her discussion, as we shall see, makes the decision highly dependent on the circumstances of the case. But that doesn’t mean that if you were to take her general views about abortion seriously and you knew all the relevant facts about a particular case, you wouldn’t sometimes know—or think you knew—what ought to be done in that case. This chimes with our earlier observation about virtue ethicists’ being able to make practical recommendations about how to act.

Hursthouse emphasises that she’s not concerned with assessing laws about abortion. She isn’t going to tell us that abortion should be legal or illegal. She is going to talk strictly about the morality of this practice. Obviously the two concerns are not the same. It is possible to think that abortion is immoral but should not be illegal—perhaps because the evils of unsafe, illegal abortions outweigh anything to be gained by prohibition. So we should have no difficulty in allowing Hursthouse to make this distinction. The first really controversial feature of Hursthouse’s account is that she dismisses women’s rights as irrelevant. This sets her against much contemporary discussion of the subject (including positions like that of Thomson discussed in the previous section), because many people think that the right of a woman to control her own body is central to the case for allowing abortion. But those sympathetic to the idea of such a right should not rush to condemn Hursthouse here. Remember again that she is concerned about whether it is right or wrong to have abortions, not whether it is right or wrong to prohibit others from having them. If women do have a right to abortion under certain circumstances, then it must be wrong for others to stop them from having them—or else it is hard to see what the right would amount to. But it doesn’t follow that it’s morally O.K. for women to exercise that right. In support of this, Hursthouse points out that acting within your rights is no guarantee that you act kindly, wisely etc. Indeed, in exercising a moral right, I may act callously, selfishly, dishonestly and so on. The link with virtue ethics is clear—acting within your rights doesn’t guarantee that you act virtuously. Another aspect of the contemporary debate that Hursthouse dismisses as irrelevant is metaphysical discussion of whether the foetus is a person.
Hursthouse, with her distinctive virtue-ethical take on the issue, argues that it must be possible to display the virtue of wisdom without having obscure knowledge that can only be reached by complicated philosophical deliberation. I think the idea is that wisdom must be within everyone’s reach, so to speak, even if not everyone actually attains it, so it must be possible to come to a wise decision about abortion without being clever enough to understand a philosophical debate. Now it may be true that you can be wise without being of high intellectual ability. But surely if you are wise, you will to some extent seek out knowledge commensurate with your intellectual ability and, as far as those who can’t intellectually cope with the debate is concerned, maybe it’s a part of virtue to defer to those who are more knowledgeable than yourself, a point that many virtue ethicists, including Hursthouse herself, seem willing to accept. I’m not suggesting, by the way, that it is a good idea to get too concerned in the abortion issue about the question of whether the foetus is a person. I agree that this isn’t a good thing, but the reason is different from the one given by Hursthouse about wisdom. It’s what she calls the ‘well-worn point’—but which I think is a very important point here and one to which we have already alluded—that the transition from non-person to person in the development of the foetus is a very gradual one, and there is no definite moment at which it ceases to be just a ‘creature’ and actually becomes a person: if this is right, then the reason why it is so hard to answer the question of whether the foetus is a person during the early stages of development is that there is no right answer to it and time devoted to trying to answer the question is therefore not time well spent.

But if Hursthouse doesn’t think women’s rights or the metaphysical status of the foetus is relevant, what does she think is? Well, what she thinks are supremely important are the familiar facts about pregnancy and its implications in people’s lives. These, she reckons, are enough to show at least that treating an abortion as if it were no different from a haircut (or some other minor bodily change) is not to take a virtuous attitude to it. For it is to ignore the fact that in carrying out an abortion, you are ending a human life, and so showing a kind of unacceptable lightness—even callousness—of attitude. She reminds us that those who do think that an abortion is no cause for grief aren’t usually prepared to make the same claim about a spontaneous miscarriage, so there seems to be a kind of inconsistency here. Of course, Hursthouse concedes that the developmental stage of the foetus is relevant. Much more unacceptable lightness is shown if a person takes such a casual view in relation to a late abortion than when he does so in relation to an early one. Naturally, we will want to make some exceptions to this, such as women in poor health, or those worn out from having had many children or forced to do very physically demanding jobs. Such women could certainly seek an abortion without being callous. For them to go through pregnancy could be heroic and virtue ethics quite reasonably insists that heroism isn’t required of anyone—it involves going ‘beyond the call of duty’.

You may remember that one of the major concerns of virtue theorists is the idea of eudaimonia or ‘flourishing’: virtue theorists think a lot about what constitutes a good human life. Defenders of women’s rights remind us that in the abortion debate, we are not just talking about a foetus’s life, but also—and for them at least, more importantly—the life of the woman carrying it. But Hursthouse argues that we need to go further and ask “Is this life of hers a good one? Is she living well?” She suggests that since we know that having children is something that is intrinsically worthwhile, someone who opts for abortion may be showing a defective grasp of how their lives could be. Again exceptions are allowed for, e.g., women who have already had a number of children or who are too old or who devote their lives to something worthwhile that is not easy to combine with motherhood. According to Hursthouse, there has to be some weighty reason of this sort for the proposed abortion to be acceptable as part of a good, virtuous life—just not wanting to go ahead with the pregnancy because it has been found to be inconvenient isn’t good enough as a reason. And even when having
an abortion is the right thing to do, it is nevertheless in some sense an 'evil', as a human life has been cut short and it would be appropriate, she thinks, for a woman to feel guilty if, as a result of 'irresponsible' behaviour, she got herself into a situation in which an abortion was the only reasonable course of action.

In summary, there seem to be two main reasons why, in Hursthouse’s view, the attitude of a woman who chooses to have an abortion may be morally defective. They are, firstly, that parenthood is intrinsically worthwhile and, secondly, that an abortion cuts short a human life, which is an evil. How convincing are these reasons?

Regarding first the idea that parenthood is intrinsically worthwhile, I’m inclined to say this. Parenthood can involve great joys, but it can also involve great anxiety. Do those who choose parenthood believe that the positive aspects outweigh the negative ones? That is not clearly true. I suspect the decision is usually much less calculating than that. Probably you decide to be a parent because you want the positive things and you don't think very much about the negative ones, or else you decide just to put up with them. But perhaps it might be said (although this is beginning to sound more like utilitarianism than virtue ethics) that we should make such decisions using a weighing process of this sort. But I think the most I would concede is that we should if we could, but it is doubtful that we are able to exercise the necessary objectivity. And this being so, I don't think we are entitled to say that parenthood is in some objective sense intrinsically worthwhile and so I would not feel inclined to criticise someone else’s decision not to be a parent.

Now let’s turn to the argument that an abortion cuts short a human life, which is an evil. To assess this, let’s focus first on early abortions, where the foetus is furthest from the state of a being a human infant. Suppose we ask from whose perspective the ending of the foetus’s life is supposed to be an evil? The answer cannot be the foetus’s, since at this early stage, it’s not clear that the foetus has anything like a perspective on anything. So is it, then, an evil from some more neutral perspective, such that we can say that the world is not as good a place as it might have been because it lacks an extra person, with that person’s lifetime of joys and achievements?

But then the judgement would seem questionable for two reasons: first, because human lives typically contain a lot of negative as well as positive things; and secondly, because it isn’t clear that such a lack of an extra person would be any more of an evil than it is for some part of the world to have a slightly lower population than it might have had. The key thing here is that if Hursthouse can’t substantiate her claim that this is an evil, as opposed to something that is just a bit regrettable, there seems to be no reason why it shouldn’t be tolerated for the sake of some minor gain, making early abortions for the sake of convenience morally acceptable.

Now consider later abortions (say from around the eighteenth week). At this point, the foetus is surely able to feel pain. It is a being which, if not yet clearly a person, should arguably be accorded at least the same status as a higher non-human animal, which most people agree should be protected from arbitrary killing. Here, there would be more justification for regarding the killing of the foetus as an evil. While this wouldn’t necessarily impugn abortions in which there is some goal that outweighs that evil, e.g., saving the mother’s life, it would cast in a very negative light any late abortion undertaken for the sake of convenience, e.g., to avoid postponing a planned trip abroad. But this sounds like a utilitarian argument, in which the likely consequences of actions are compared to decide which is the best course of action, not a virtue-ethical argument turning on the moral qualities of the agent. Is there any way in which a moral concern for the fate of the foetus could be framed in a way that fits in with virtue ethics?

Perhaps the way to do this would be to link our discussion with Michael Slote's empathy-based
virtue ethics explained earlier. According to Slote, an act is right or morally permissible when it does not exhibit a lack of caring and wrong when it does and he thinks that an uncaring act is one whose agent shows less empathy than is normal for human beings. How could these ideas be related to the problem of abortion? Well, people’s ability to empathise is affected by a range of factors. One that is particularly important is the ability to see, hear or otherwise perceive the other person or being with whom they might or might not empathise. Common observation, as well as a number of psychological studies, confirm that if you actually see another person suffering, as opposed to just being told about it, you are more likely to empathise and want the suffering to stop. Slote himself relates this to the abortion issue by noting how an invisible foetus may not inspire as much empathy as a baby that you can see suffering in front of your very eyes. But here the importance of the developmental stage of the foetus becomes clear once again. At about the eighteenth week, ‘quickening’ occurs, that is, the woman starts to be physically aware of the foetus inside her, feeling it moving and kicking. So we are presumably entitled to say the following. A woman who decided to have an abortion at this point for the sake of convenience would have to be showing through her decision a capacity to feel empathy that was much lower than the norm and so would be acting in an uncaring way. Of course, it doesn’t follow from this that all late abortions are morally suspect. A late abortion is morally permissible if the reasoning behind it does not show lower than normal empathy. As for early abortions, where empathy is much harder for most people and may even be out of place given the primitive nature of the foetus at the very earliest developmental stages, the approach suggested gives little support for a morally negative attitude towards such abortions.
FURTHER READING

('Ethical emotivism' is often associated with A.J. Ayer, but Stevenson developed it in much greater detail.)

(This goes into more detail than I have about Plato's Theory of Forms, which provides the background to his ethical views.)


R.M. Hare (1952): The Language of Morals, Oxford University Press.
(The classic statement of ethical prescriptivism.)


(This contains Blackburn's critique of moral relativism, as well as a number of other useful articles on the subject-matter of this guide (substantive moral philosophy as well as meta-ethics).)

John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism (many editions available).
(This is Mill's defence of the utilitarian theory of ethics. It includes his discussion of the different 'qualities' of pleasure.)

(A classic of ethical intuitionism. This edition has a very helpful introduction by the editor.)

(This is one of the most authoritative anthologies on meta-ethics and includes some reasonably accessible articles, amongst them original extracts from Ayer and Moore as well as many contemporary writers.)


(Smart is for and Williams against. A lively, accessible treatment of the issues.)