

Duty, Values, Motives, and Utilitarianism

- ◆ Do you think it makes more sense to say that people are basically *good* and corrupted *by society*, or that people are basically *bad* and must be *kept in line* by society?
- ◆ Do you think society works best when each individual pursues his own best interest, or do you think this is a recipe for disaster?

- ◆ While it may be that *some* values are relative and that people are *often* selfish, we do have to conclude that *all* values are relative or that people are *always* selfish. This leaves space for two ideas:
 - ◆ There is such a thing as moral knowledge.
 - ◆ People are capable of acting on moral knowledge.

- ◆ Perhaps the simplest approach to ethics would be to find an authoritative rule book which told us what moral principles to follow. Some people believe such books are to be found in religion.
- ◆ The world's great religions have been and continue to be important sources of moral insight and guidance to millions of people. However, what questions or issues does this fact raise?
- ◆ What sacred texts should be followed?
- ◆ Do these texts settle all ethical questions?
- ◆ Do they free us from the responsibility of thinking about ethics?

- ◆ Religious ethical questions:
 - ◆ According to the New Testament, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 19:24) How do you think this statement should be interpreted, as a statement of ethics?
 - ◆ The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky said that, “If God is dead, everything is permitted.” What do you think he meant by this? Do you agree or disagree with him?

- ◆ Some philosophers have said that ethics is fundamentally a matter of doing your duty and fulfilling your responsibilities.
- ◆ The word *duty* has sometimes been associated with mindlessly obeying orders. In that sense, it has not always had good press.
- ◆ Do all assigned duties carry ethical responsibilities with them? The doctor, for example, has an ethical responsibility to help the sick and injured. What other jobs carry this kind of ethical responsibility?

- ◆ If everyone has a right to life, who exactly has a duty to keep alive the thousands of people that starve to death every day? Do you?
- ◆ Imagine that you and a group of colonists have just arrived on a fertile and uninhabited planet and decide to make a ten-point declaration of rights. What rights would you include in this declaration? How would you justify your choice?

- ◆ If a person has been unfaithful to their partner, should he or she confess and make their partner unhappy, or say nothing, thus deceiving them but leaving them happy?
- ◆ If your grandmother and a world-famous doctor are trapped in a burning building and you have time to rescue only one of them, should you save your grandmother because she is a family member, or the doctor because she is more useful to society as a whole?
- ◆ If your wife is dying of a rare disease and you cannot afford the medication that will cure her, are you justified in stealing the drugs?
- ◆ If a terrorist group takes a civilian hostage and threatens to kill her unless the government releases five convicted terrorists, should the government give in to their demands?

- ◆ Immanuel Kant's philosophical perspective on ethics states that the moral value of an action is determined by the motive for which it is done rather than the consequences that follow from it.
- ◆ If you are trying to be helpful but things turn out badly, we do not blame you. After all, you meant well.
- ◆ But if you intend to harm someone, but your efforts come to nothing, we still think of you as a bad person.
- ◆ Do you agree with these statements?

- ◆ If a cat jumps into a baby carriage and attacks a baby, who deserves more praise for removing it: someone who likes cats, or someone who is afraid of them?
- ◆ Who deserves more praise: a person who helps another person because he likes him, or a person who helps another person even though he doesn't like him?

- ◆ Utilitarianism is a theory of ethics that states a very simple principle: we should seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people.
- ◆ A very *democratic* theory: each individual is considered to be the best judge of what makes him or her happy, and every individual's happiness is taken into account.
- ◆ A *rational* theory because it encourages us to take into account not only the short-term consequences of our actions, but the long-term effects, too.
- ◆ An *egalitarian* theory because it can justify redistributing money from the rich to the poor. Since a dollar means more to a poor person than to a rich person, a progressive system of taxation which takes some money from the rich and gives it to the poor with increase happiness for the greatest number of people.