12

WHY ACT MORALLY?

PREVIOUS chapters of this book have discussed what we ought, morally, to do about several practical issues and what means we are justified in adopting to achieve our ethical goals. The nature of our conclusions about these issues – the demands they make upon us – raises a further, more fundamental question: why should we act morally?

Take our conclusions about the use of animals for food, or the aid the rich should give the poor. Some readers may accept these conclusions, become vegetarians, and do what they can to reduce absolute poverty. Others may disagree with our conclusions, maintaining that there is nothing wrong with eating animals and that they are under no moral obligation to do anything about reducing absolute poverty. There is also, however, likely to be a third group, consisting of readers who find no fault with the ethical arguments of these chapters, yet do not change their diets or their contributions to overseas aid. Of this third group, some will just be weak-willed, but others may want an answer to a further practical question. If the conclusions of ethics require so much of us, they may ask, should we bother about ethics at all?

UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION

'Why should I act morally?' is a different type of question from those that we have been discussing up to now. Questions like 'Why should I treat people of different ethnic groups equally?' or 'Why is abortion justifiable?' seek ethical reasons for acting

in a certain way. These are questions within ethics. They presuppose the ethical point of view. 'Why should I act morally?' is on another level. It is not a question within ethics, but a question about ethics.

'Why should I act morally?' is therefore a question about something normally presupposed. Such questions are perplexing. Some philosophers have found this particular question so perplexing that they have rejected it as logically improper, as an attempt to ask something that cannot properly be asked.

One ground for this rejection is the claim that our ethical principles are, by definition, the principles we take as overridingly important. This means that whatever principles are overriding for a particular person are necessarily that person's ethical principles, and a person who accepts as an ethical principle that she ought to give her wealth to help the poor must, by definition, have actually decided to give away her wealth. On this definition of ethics once a person has made an ethical decision no further practical question can arise. Hence it is impossible to make sense of the question: 'Why should I act morally?'

It might be thought a good reason for accepting the definition of ethics as overriding that it allows us to dismiss as meaningless an otherwise troublesome question. Adopting this definition cannot solve real problems, however, for it leads to correspondingly greater difficulties in establishing any ethical conclusion. Take, for example, the conclusion that the rich ought to aid the poor. We were able to argue for this in Chapter 8 only because we assumed that, as suggested in the first two chapters of this book, the universalisability of ethical judgments requires us to go beyond thinking only about our own interests, and leads us to take a point of view from which we must give equal consideration to the interests of all affected by our actions. We cannot hold that ethical judgments must be universalisable and *at the same time* define a person's ethical principles as whatever principles that person takes as overridingly important – for what if

I take as overridingly important some non-universalisable principle like 'I ought to do whatever benefits *me*'? If we define ethical principles as whatever principles one takes as overriding, then anything whatever may count as an ethical principle, for one may take any principle whatever as overridingly important. Thus what we gain by being able to dismiss the question:'Why should I act morally?' we lose by being unable to use the universalisability of ethical judgments – or any other feature of ethics – to argue for particular conclusions about what is morally right. Taking ethics as in some sense necessarily involving a universal point of view seems to me a more natural and less confusing way of discussing these issues.

Other philosophers have rejected 'Why should I act morally?' for a different reason. They think it must be rejected for the same reason that we must reject another question, 'Why should I be rational?' which like 'Why should I act morally?' also questions something – in this case rationality – normally presupposed. 'Why should I be rational?' really is logically improper because in answering it we would be giving reasons for being rational. Thus we would presuppose rationality in our attempt to justify rationality. The resulting justification of rationality would be circular – which shows, not that rationality lacks a necessary justification, but that it needs no justification, because it cannot intelligibly be questioned unless it is already presupposed.

Is 'Why should I act morally?' like 'Why should I be rational?' in that it presupposes the very point of view it questions? It would be, if we interpreted the 'should' as a moral 'should'. Then the question would ask for moral reasons for being moral. This would be absurd. Once we have decided that an action is morally obligatory, there is no further moral question to ask. It is redundant to ask why I should, morally, do the action that I morally should do.

There is, however, no need to interpret the question as a request for an ethical justification of ethics. 'Should' need not

mean 'should, morally'. It could simply be a way of asking for reasons for action, without any specification about the kind of reasons wanted. We sometimes want to ask a general practical question, from no particular point of view. Faced with a difficult choice, we ask a close friend for advice. Morally, he says, we ought to do A, but B would be more in our interests, while etiquette demands C and only D would display a real sense of style. This answer may not satisfy us. We want advice on which of these standpoints to adopt. If it is possible to ask such a question we must ask it from a position of neutrality between all these points of view, not of commitment to any one of them.

'Why should I act morally?' is this sort of question. If it is not possible to ask practical questions without presupposing a point of view, we are unable to say anything intelligible about the most ultimate practical choices. Whether to act according to considerations of ethics, self-interest, etiquette, or aesthetics would be a choice 'beyond reason' – in a sense, an arbitrary choice. Before we resign ourselves to this conclusion we should at least attempt to interpret the question so that the mere asking of it does not commit us to any particular point of view.

We can now formulate the question more precisely. It is a question about the ethical point of view, asked from a position outside it. But what is 'the ethical point of view'? I have suggested that a distinguishing feature of ethics is that ethical judgments are universalisable. Ethics requires us to go beyond our own personal point of view to a standpoint like that of the impartial spectator who takes a universal point of view.

Given this conception of ethics, 'Why should I act morally?' is a question that may properly be asked by anyone wondering whether to act only on grounds that would be acceptable from this universal point of view. It is, after all, possible to act – and some people do act – without thinking of anything except one's own interests. The question asks for reasons for going beyond this personal basis of action and acting only on judgments one is prepared to prescribe universally.

REASON AND ETHICS

There is an ancient line of philosophical thought that attempts to demonstrate that to act rationally is to act ethically. The argument is today associated with Kant and is mainly found in the writings of modern Kantians, though it goes back as least as far as the Stoics. The form in which the argument is presented varies, but the common structure is as follows:

1 Some requirement of universalisability or impartiality is essential to ethics.
2 Reason is universally or objectively valid. If, for example, it follows from the premises 'All humans are mortal' and 'Socrates is human' that Socrates is mortal, then this inference must follow universally. It cannot be valid for me and invalid for you. This is a general point about reason, whether theoretical or practical.

Therefore:

3 Only a judgment that satisfies the requirement described in (1) as a necessary condition of an ethical judgment will be an objectively rational judgment in accordance with (2). For I cannot expect any other rational agents to accept as valid for them a judgment that I would not accept if I were in their place; and if two rational agents could not accept each other's judgments, they could not be rational judgments, for the reason given in (2). To say that I would accept the judgment I make, even if I were in someone else's position and they in mine is, however, simply to say that my judgment is one I can prescribe from a universal point of view. Ethics and reason both require us to rise above our own particular point of view and take a perspective from which our own personal identity – the role we happen to occupy – is unimportant. Thus reason requires us to act on universalisable judgments and, to that extent, to act ethically.

Is this argument valid? I have already indicated that I accept the first point, that ethics involves universalisability. The second

point also seems undeniable. Reason must be universal. Does the conclusion therefore follow? Here is the flaw in the argument. The conclusion appears to follow directly from the premises; but this move involves a slide from the limited sense in which it is true that a rational judgment must be universally valid, to a stronger sense of 'universally valid' that is equivalent to universalisability. The difference between these two senses can be seen by considering a non-universalisable imperative, like the purely egoistic: 'Let everyone do what is in my interests.' This differs from the imperative of universalisable egoism – 'Let everyone do what is in *her or his own* interests' – because it contains an ineliminable reference to a particular person. It therefore cannot be an ethical imperative. Does it also lack the universality required if it is to be a rational basis for action? Surely not. Every rational agent could accept that the purely egoistic activity of other rational agents is rationally justifiable. Pure egoism could be rationally adopted by everyone.

Let us look at this more closely. It must be conceded that there is a sense in which one purely egoistic rational agent – call him Jack – could not accept the practical judgments of another purely egoistic rational agent – call her Jill. Assuming Jill's interests differ from Jack's, Jill may be acting rationally in urging Jack to do A, while Jack is also acting rationally in deciding against doing A.

This disagreement is, however, compatible with all rational agents accepting pure egoism. Though they accept pure egoism, it points them in different directions because they start from different places. When Jack adopts pure egoism, it leads him to further his interests and when Jill adopts pure egoism it leads her to further her interests. Hence the disagreement over what to do. On the other hand – and this is the sense in which pure egoism could be accepted as valid by all rational agents – if we were to ask Jill (off the record and promising not to tell Jack) what she thinks it would be rational for Jack to do, she would,

if truthful, have to reply that it would be rational for Jack to do what is in his own interests, rather than what is in her interests.

So when purely egoistic rational agents oppose each other's acts, it does not indicate disagreement over the rationality of pure egoism. Pure egoism, though not a universalisable principle, could be accepted as a rational basis of action by all rational agents. The sense in which rational judgments must be universally acceptable is weaker than the sense in which ethical judgements must be. That an action will benefit me rather than anyone else could be a valid reason for doing it, though it could not be an ethical reason for doing it.

A consequence of this conclusion is that rational agents may rationally try to prevent each other from doing what they admit the other is rationally justified in doing. There is, unfortunately, nothing paradoxical about this. Two salespeople competing for an important sale will accept each other's conduct as rational, though each aims to thwart the other. The same holds of two soldiers meeting in battle, or two footballers vying for the ball.

Accordingly, this attempted demonstration of a link between reason and ethics fails. There may be other ways of forging this link, but it is difficult to see any that hold greater promise of success. The chief obstacle to be overcome is the nature of practical reason. Long ago David Hume argued that reason in action applies only to means, not to ends. The ends must be given by our wants and desires. Hume unflinchingly drew out the implications of this view:

> 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me. 'Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter.

Extreme as it is, Hume's view of practical reason has stood up to criticism remarkably well. His central claim – that in practical reasoning we start from something wanted – is difficult to refute; yet it must be refuted if any argument is to succeed in showing that it is rational for all of us to act ethically irrespective of what we want.

Nor is the refutation of Hume all that is needed for a demonstration of the rational necessity of acting ethically. In *The Possibility of Altruism*, Thomas Nagel has argued forcefully that not to take one's own future desires into account in one's practical deliberations – irrespective of whether one now happens to desire the satisfaction of those future desires – would indicate a failure to see oneself as a person existing over time, the present being merely one time among others in one's life. So it is my conception of myself as a person that makes it rational for me to consider my long-term interests. This holds true even if I have 'a more ardent affection' for something that I acknowledge is not really, all things considered, in my own interest.

Whether Nagel's argument succeeds in vindicating the rationality of prudence is one question: whether a similar argument can also be used in favour of a form of altruism based on taking the desires of *others* into account is another question altogether. Nagel attempts this analogous argument. The role occupied by 'seeing the present as merely one time among others' is, in the argument for altruism, taken by 'seeing oneself as merely one person among others'. But whereas it would be extremely difficult for most of us to cease conceiving of ourselves as existing over time, with the present merely one time among others that we will live through, the way we see ourselves as a person among others is quite different. Henry Sidgwick's observation on this point seems to me exactly right:

> It would be contrary to Common Sense to deny that the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental, and that consequently 'I' am concerned with the

> quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals: and this being so, I do not see how it can be proved that this distinction is not to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action for an individual.

So it is not only Hume's view of practical reason that stands in the way of attempts to show that to act rationally is to act ethically; we might succeed in overthrowing that barrier, only to find our way blocked by the commonsense distinction between self and others. Taken together, these are formidable obstacles and I know of no way of overcoming them.

ETHICS AND SELF-INTEREST

If practical reasoning begins with something wanted, to show that it is rational to act morally would involve showing that in acting morally we achieve something we want. If, agreeing with Sidgwick rather than Hume, we hold that it is rational to act in our long-term interests irrespective of what we happen to want at the present moment, we could show that it is rational to act morally by showing that it is in our long-term interests to do so. There have been many attempts to argue along these lines, ever since Plato, in *The Republic*, portrayed Socrates as arguing that to be virtuous is to have the different elements of one's personality ordered in a harmonious manner, and this is necessary for happiness. We shall look at these arguments shortly; but first it is necessary to assess an objection to this whole approach to 'Why should I act morally?'

People often say that to defend morality by appealing to self-interest is to misunderstand what ethics is all about. F. H. Bradley stated this eloquently:

> What answer can we give when the question Why should I be Moral?, in the sense of What will it advantage Me?, is put to us? Here we shall do well, I think, to avoid all praises of the

> pleasantness of virtue. We may believe that it transcends all possible delights of vice, but it would be well to remember that we desert a moral point of view, that we degrade and prostitute virtue, when to those who do not love her for herself we bring ourselves to recommend her for the sake of her pleasures.

In other words, we can never get people to act morally by providing reasons of self-interest, because if they accept what we say and act on the reasons given, they will only be acting self-interestedly, not morally.

One reply to this objection would be that the substance of the action, what is actually done, is more important than the motive. People might give money to famine relief because their friends will think better of them, or they might give the same amount because they think it their duty. Those saved from starvation by the gift will benefit to the same extent either way.

This is true but crude. It can be made more sophisticated if it is combined with an appropriate account of the nature and function of ethics. Ethics, though not consciously created, is a product of social life that has the function of promoting values common to the members of the society. Ethical judgments do this by praising and encouraging actions in accordance with these values. Ethical judgments are concerned with motives because this is a good indication of the tendency of an action to promote good or evil, but also because it is here that praise and blame may be effective in altering the tendency of a person's actions. Conscientiousness (that is, acting for the sake of doing what is right) is a particularly useful motive, from the community's point of view. People who are conscientious will, if they accept the values of their society (and if most people did not accept these values they would not be the values of the society) always tend to promote what the society values. They may have no generous or sympathetic inclinations, but if they think it their duty to give famine relief, they will do so. Moreover, those motivated by the desire to do what is right can be relied upon to act as they think right in all circumstances,

whereas those who act from some other motive, like self-interest, will only do what they think right when they believe it will also be in their interest. Conscientiousness is thus a kind of multipurpose gap-filler that can be used to motivate people towards whatever is valued, even if the natural virtues normally associated with action in accordance with those values (generosity, sympathy, honesty, tolerance, humility, and so on) are lacking. (This needs some qualification: a conscientious mother may provide as well for her children as a mother who loves them, but she cannot love them because it is the right thing to do. Sometimes conscientiousness is a poor substitute for the real thing.)

On this view of ethics it is still results, not motives, that really matter. Conscientiousness is of value because of its consequences. Yet, unlike, say, benevolence, conscientiousness can be praised and encouraged only for its own sake. To praise a conscientious act for its consequences would be to praise not conscientiousness, but something else altogether. If we appeal to sympathy or self-interest as a reason for doing one's duty, then we are not encouraging people to do their duty for its own sake. If conscientiousness is to be encouraged, it must be thought of as good for its own sake.

It is different in the case of an act done from a motive that people act upon irrespective of praise and encouragement. The use of ethical language is then inappropriate. We do not normally say that people ought to do, or that it is their duty to do, whatever gives them the greatest pleasure, for most people are sufficiently motivated to do this anyway. So, whereas we praise good acts done for the sake of doing what is right, we withhold our praise when we believe the act was done from some motive like self-interest.

This emphasis on motives and on the moral worth of doing right for its own sake is now embedded in our notion of ethics. To the extent that it is so embedded, we will feel that to provide

considerations of self-interest for doing what is right is to empty the action of its moral worth.

My suggestion is that our notion of ethics has become misleading to the extent that moral worth is attributed only to action done because it is right, without any ulterior motive. It is understandable, and from the point of view of society perhaps even desirable, that this attitude should prevail; nevertheless, those who accept this view of ethics, and are led by it to do what is right because it is right, without asking for any further reason, are falling victim to a kind of confidence trick – though not, of course, a consciously perpetrated one.

That this view of ethics is unjustifiable has already been indicated by the failure of the argument discussed earlier in this chapter for a rational justification of ethics. In the history of Western philosophy, no one has urged more strongly than Kant that our ordinary moral consciousness finds moral worth only when duty is done for duty's sake. Yet Kant himself saw that without a rational justification this common conception of ethics would be 'a mere phantom of the brain'. And this is indeed the case. If we reject – as in general terms we have done – the Kantian justification of the rationality of ethics, but try to retain the Kantian conception of ethics, ethics is left hanging without support. It becomes a closed system, a system that cannot be questioned because its first premise – that only action done because it is right has any moral worth – rules out the only remaining possible justification for accepting this very premise. Morality is, on this view, no more rational an end than any other allegedly self-justifying practice, like etiquette or the kind of religious faith that comes only to those who first set aside all sceptical doubts.

Taken as a view of ethics as a whole, we should abandon this Kantian notion of ethics. This does not mean, however, that we should never do what we see to be right simply because we see it to be right, without further reasons. Here we need to

appeal to the distinction Hare has made between intuitive and critical thinking. When I stand back from my day-to-day ethical decisions and ask why I should act ethically, I should seek reasons in the broadest sense, and not allow Kantian preconceptions to deter me from considering self-interested reasons for living an ethical life. If my search is successful it will provide me with reasons for taking up the ethical point of view as a settled policy, a way of living. I would not then ask, in my day-to-day ethical decision making, whether each particular right action is in my interests. Instead I do it because I see myself as an ethical person. In everyday situations, I will simply assume that doing what is right is in my interests, and once I have decided what is right, I will go ahead and do it, without thinking about further reasons for doing what is right. To deliberate over the ultimate reasons for doing what is right in each case would impossibly complicate my life; it would also be inadvisable because in particular situations I might be too greatly influenced by strong but temporary desires and inclinations and so make decisions I would later regret.

That, at least, is how a justification of ethics in terms of self-interest might work, without defeating its own aim. We can now ask if such a justification exists. There is a daunting list of those who, following Plato's lead, have offered one: Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, Butler, Hegel, even – for all his strictures against prostituting virtue – Bradley. Like Plato, these philosophers made broad claims about human nature and the conditions under which human beings can be happy. Some were also able to fall back on a belief that virtue will be rewarded and wickedness punished in a life after our bodily death. Philosophers cannot use this argument if they want to carry conviction nowadays; nor can they adopt sweeping psychological theories on the basis of their own general experience of their fellows, as philosophers used to do when psychology was a branch of philosophy.

It might be said that since philosophers are not empirical

scientists, discussion of the connection between acting ethically and living a fulfilled and happy life should be left to psychologists, sociologists, and other appropriate experts. The question is not, however, dealt with by any other single discipline and its relevance to practical ethics is reason enough for our looking into it.

What facts about human nature could show that ethics and self- interest coincide? One theory is that we all have benevolent or sympathetic inclinations that make us concerned about the welfare of others. Another relies on a natural conscience that gives rise to guilt feelings when we do what we know to be wrong. But how strong are these benevolent desires or feelings of guilt? Is it possible to suppress them? If so, isn't it possible that in a world in which humans and other animals are suffering in great numbers, suppressing one's conscience and sympathy for others is the surest way to happiness?

To meet this objection those who would link ethics and happiness must assert that we cannot be happy if these elements of our nature are suppressed. Benevolence and sympathy, they might argue, are tied up with the capacity to take part in friendly or loving relations with others, and there can be no real happiness without such relationships. For the same reason it is necessary to take at least some ethical standards seriously, and to be open and honest in living by them – for a life of deception and dishonesty is a furtive life, in which the possibility of discovery always clouds the horizon. Genuine acceptance of ethical standards is likely to mean that we feel some guilt – or at least that we are less pleased with ourselves than we otherwise would be – when we do not live up to them.

These claims about the connection between our character and our prospects of happiness are no more than hypotheses. Attempts to confirm them by detailed research are sparse and inadequate. A. H. Maslow, an American psychologist, asserted that human beings have a need for self-actualisation that involves growing towards courage, kindness, knowledge, love,

honesty, and unselfishness. When we fulfil this need, we feel serene, joyful, filled with zest, sometimes euphoric, and generally happy. When we act contrary to our need for self-actualisation, we experience anxiety, despair, boredom, shame, emptiness and are generally unable to enjoy ourselves. It would be nice if Maslow should turn out to be right; unfortunately, the data Maslow produced in support of his theory consisted of limited studies of selected people and cannot be considered anything more than suggestive.

Human nature is so diverse that one may doubt if any generalisation about the kind of character that leads to happiness could hold for all human beings. What, for instance, of those we call 'psychopaths'? Psychiatrists use this term as a label for a person who is asocial, impulsive, egocentric, unemotional, lacking in feelings of remorse, shame, or guilt, and apparently unable to form deep and enduring personal relationships. Psychopaths are certainly abnormal, but whether it is proper to say that they are mentally ill is another matter. At least on the surface, they do not *suffer* from their condition, and it is not obvious that it is in their interest to be 'cured'. Hervey Cleckley, the author of a classic study of psychopathy entitled *The Mask of Sanity*, notes that since his book was first published he has received countless letters from people desperate for help – but they are from the parents, spouses, and other relatives of psychopaths, almost never from the psychopaths themselves. This is not surprising, for while psychopaths are asocial and indifferent to the welfare of others, they seem to enjoy life. Psychopaths often appear to be charming, intelligent people, with no delusions or other signs of irrational thinking. When interviewed they say things like: 'A lot has happened to me, a lot more will happen. But I enjoy living and I am always looking forward to each day. I like laughing and I've done a lot. I am essentially a clown at heart – but a happy one. I always take the bad with the good.' There is no effective therapy for psychopathy, which may be explained by the fact that psychopaths

see nothing wrong with their behaviour and often find it extremely rewarding, at least in the short term. Of course their impulsive nature and lack of a sense of shame or guilt means that some psychopaths end up in prison, though it is hard to tell how many do not, since those who avoid prison are also more likely to avoid contact with psychiatrists. Studies have shown that a surprisingly large number of psychopaths are able to avoid prison despite grossly antisocial behaviour, probably because of their well-known ability to convince others that they are truly repentant, that it will never happen again, that they deserve another chance, and so forth.

The existence of psychopathic people counts against the contention that benevolence, sympathy, and feelings of guilt are present in everyone. It also appears to count against attempts to link happiness with the possession of these inclinations. But let us pause before we accept this latter conclusion. Must we accept psychopaths' own evaluations of their happiness? They are, after all, notoriously persuasive liars. Moreover, even if they are telling the truth as they see it, are they qualified to say that they are really happy, when they seem unable to experience the emótional states that play such a large part in the happiness and fulfilment of more normal people? Admittedly, a psychopath could use the same argument against us: how can we say that we are truly happy when we have not experienced the excitement and freedom that comes from complete irresponsibility? Since we cannot enter into the subjective states of psychopathic people, nor they into ours, the dispute is not easy to resolve.

Cleckley suggests that the psychopaths' behaviour can be explained as a response to the meaninglessness of their lives. It is characteristic of psychopaths to work for a while at a job and then just when their ability and charm have taken them to the crest of success, commit some petty and easily detectable crime. A similar pattern occurs in their personal relationships. (There is support to be found here for Thomas Nagel's account of im-

prudence as rational only if one fails to see oneself as a person existing over time, with the present merely one among other times one will live through. Certainly psychopathic people live largely in the present and lack any coherent life plan.)

Cleckley explains this erratic and to us inadequately motivated behaviour by likening the psychopath's life to that of children forced to sit through a performance of *King Lear*. Children are restless and misbehave under these conditions because they cannot enjoy the play as adults do. They act to relieve boredom. Similarly, Cleckley says, psychopaths are bored because their emotional poverty means that they cannot take interest in, or gain satisfaction from, what for others are the most important things in life: love, family, success in business or professional life, and the like. These things simply do not matter to them. Their unpredictable and antisocial behaviour is an attempt to relieve what would otherwise be a tedious existence. These claims are speculative and Cleckley admits that they may not be possible to establish scientifically. They do suggest, however, an aspect of the psychopath's life that undermines the otherwise attractive nature of the psychopath's free-wheeling life. Most reflective people, at some time or other, want their life to have some kind of meaning. Few of us could deliberately choose a way of life that we regarded as utterly meaningless. For this reason most of us would not choose to live a psychopathic life, however enjoyable it might be.

Yet there is something paradoxical about criticising the psychopath's life for its meaninglessness. Don't we have to accept, in the absence of religious belief, that life really is meaningless, not just for the psychopath but for all of us? And if this is so, why should we not choose – if it were in our power to choose our personality – the life of a psychopath? But is it true that, religion aside, life is meaningless? Now our pursuit of reasons for acting morally has led us to what is often regarded as the ultimate philosophical question.

HAS LIFE A MEANING?

In what sense does rejection of belief in a god imply rejection of the view that life has any meaning? If this world had been created by some divine being with a particular goal in mind, it could be said to have a meaning, at least for that divine being. If we could know what the divine being's purpose in creating us was, we could then know what the meaning of our life was for our creator. If we accepted our creator's purpose (though why we should do that would need to be explained) we could claim to know the meaning of life.

When we reject belief in a god we must give up the idea that life on this planet has some preordained meaning. Life *as a whole* has no meaning. Life began, as the best available theories tell us, in a chance combination of molecules; it then evolved through random mutations and natural selection. All this just happened; it did not happen for any overall purpose. Now that it has resulted in the existence of beings who prefer some states of affairs to others, however, it may be possible for particular lives to be meaningful. In this sense atheists can find meaning in life.

Let us return to the comparison between the life of a psychopath and that of a more normal person. Why should the psychopath's life not be meaningful? We have seen that psychopaths are egocentric to an extreme: neither other people, nor worldly success, nor anything else really matters to them. But why is their own enjoyment of life not sufficient to give meaning to their lives?

Most of us would not be able to find happiness by deliberately setting out to enjoy ourselves without caring about anyone or anything else. The pleasures we obtained in that way would seem empty and would soon pall. We seek a meaning for our lives beyond our own pleasures and find fulfilment and happiness in doing what we see to be meaningful. If our life has

no meaning other than our own happiness, we are likely to find that when we have obtained what we think we need to be happy, happiness itself still eludes us.

That those who aim at happiness for happiness's sake often fail to find it, while others find happiness in pursuing altogether different goals, has been called 'the paradox of hedonism'. It is not, of course, a logical paradox but a claim about the way in which we come to be happy. Like other generalisations on this subject, it lacks empirical confirmation. Yet it matches our everyday observations and is consistent with our nature as evolved, purposive beings. Human beings survive and reproduce themselves through purposive action. We obtain happiness and fulfilment by working towards and achieving our goals. In evolutionary terms we could say that happiness functions as an internal reward for our achievements. Subjectively, we regard achieving the goal (or progressing towards it) as a reason for happiness. Our own happiness, therefore, is a by-product of aiming at something else, and not to be obtained by setting our sights on happiness alone.

The psychopath's life can now be seen to be meaningless in a way that a normal life is not. It is meaningless because it looks inward to the pleasures of the present moment and not outward to anything more long-term or far-reaching. More normal lives have meaning because they are lived to some larger purpose.

All this is speculative. You may accept or reject it to the extent that it agrees with your own observation and introspection. My next – and final – suggestion is more speculative still. It is that to find an enduring meaning in our lives it is not enough to go beyond psychopaths who have no long-term commitments or life plans; we must also go beyond more prudent egoists who have long term plans concerned only with their own interests. The prudent egoists may find meaning in their lives for a time, for they have the purpose of furthering their own interests; but what, in the end, does that amount to? When everything in our interests has been achieved, do we just sit back and be

happy? Could we be happy in this way? Or would we decide that we had still not quite reached our target, that there was something else we needed before we could sit back and enjoy it all? Most materially successful egoists take the latter route, thus escaping the necessity of admitting that they cannot find happiness in permanent holidaying. People who slaved to establish small businesses, telling themselves they would do it only until they had made enough to live comfortably, keep working long after they have passed their original target. Their material 'needs' expand just fast enough to keep ahead of their income.

The 1980s, the 'decade of greed', provided plenty of examples of the insatiable nature of the desire for wealth. In 1985 Dennis Levine was a highly successful Wall Street banker with the fastest-growing and most talked-about Wall Street firm, Drexel Burnham Lambert. But Levine was not satisfied:

> When I was earning $20,000 a year, I thought, *I can make $100,000*. When I was earning $100,000 a year, I thought, *I can make $200,000*. When I was making $1 million, I thought, *I can make $3 million*. There was always somebody one rung higher on the ladder, and I could never stop wondering: Is he really twice as good as I am.

Levine decided to take matters into his own hands and arranged with friends at other Wall Street firms to exchange confidential information that would allow them to profit by buying shares in companies that were about to become takeover targets. By this method Levine made an additional $11 million, on top of what he earned in salary and bonuses. He also ended up bringing about his own ruin, and spending time in prison. That, however, is not the relevant point here. No doubt some who use inside information to make millions of dollars do not get caught. What is less certain, however, is that they really find satisfaction and fulfilment in having more money.

Now we begin to see where ethics comes into the problem of living a meaningful life. If we are looking for a purpose

broader than our own interests, something that will allow us to see our lives as possessing significance beyond the narrow confines of our own conscious states, one obvious solution is to take up the ethical point of view. The ethical point of view does, as we have seen, require us to go beyond a personal point of view to the standpoint of an impartial spectator. Thus looking at things ethically is a way of transcending our inward-looking concerns and identifying ourselves with the most objective point of view possible – with, as Sidgwick put it, 'the point of view of the universe'.

The point of view of the universe is a lofty standpoint. In the rarefied air that surrounds it we may get carried away into talking, as Kant does, of the moral point of view, 'inevitably' humbling all who compare their own limited nature with it. I do not want to suggest anything as sweeping as this. Earlier in this chapter, in rejecting Thomas Nagel's argument for the rationality of altruism, I said that there is nothing irrational about being concerned with the quality of one's own existence in a way that one is not concerned with the quality of existence of other individuals. Without going back on this, I am now suggesting that rationality, in the broad sense that includes self-awareness and reflection on the nature and point of our own existence, may push us towards concerns broader than the quality of our own existence; but the process is not a necessary one and those who do not take part in it – or, who in taking part, do not follow it all the way to the ethical point of view – are neither irrational nor in error. Psychopaths, for all I know, may simply be unable to obtain as much happiness through caring about others as they obtain by antisocial acts. Other people find collecting stamps an entirely adequate way of giving purpose to their lives. There is nothing irrational about that; but others again grow out of stamp collecting as they become more aware of their situation in the world and more reflective about their purposes. To this third group the ethical point of view offers a meaning and purpose in life that one does not grow out of.

(At least, one cannot grow out of the ethical point of view until all ethical tasks have been accomplished. If that utopia were ever achieved, our purposive nature might well leave us dissatisfied, much as egoists might be dissatisfied when they have everything they need to be happy. There is nothing paradoxical about this, for we should not expect evolution to have equipped us, in advance, with the ability to enjoy a situation that has never previously occurred. Nor is this going to be a practical problem in the near future.)

'Why act morally?' cannot be given an answer that will provide everyone with overwhelming reasons for acting morally. Ethically indefensible behaviour is not always irrational. We will probably always need the sanctions of the law and social pressure to provide additional reasons against serious violations of ethical standards. At the same time, those reflective enough to ask the question we have been discussing in this chapter are also those most likely to appreciate the reasons that can be offered for taking the ethical point of view.