

## MORAL PHILOSOPHY – What does it mean to be ‘good’?

Answer questions at the end.

This chapter is a bit longer – don’t try to do it all at once!

101



# MORAL PHILOSOPHY

If any area of philosophy has a claim to be “practical”, it is moral philosophy. It touches on some of the most emotive and controversial issues in life. But while philosophers have been concerned to discover how we should live, moral philosophy is best understood as the attempt to think critically and reflectively about right and wrong, good and bad.

**T**here are three different ways in which we can think about morals. First, we can think about whether a particular action or type of action is right or wrong. Are abortion or euthanasia right or wrong? When is lying permissible, if ever? This type of thinking is called practical ethics, and anyone who has ever argued the case for or against a certain action on the basis of morality has engaged in it.

How are we to find the answers to these types of questions? Normative ethics, the second way to think about right and wrong, good and bad, develops general theories about what is right and what is good that we can use in practical cases. We can try to understand these ideas by looking at our actions themselves; or through examining the consequences of our actions; or by looking at the types of people we can be or become.

The third way to think critically and reflectively about morality is metaethics (“meta-” is a Greek word that means

either “above”, “beyond”, or “after”). Metaethics is the study of the very ideas of right and wrong, good and bad – the concepts that ethics takes for granted. For example, if I say that euthanasia is wrong, am I making a statement that can be true or false in the same way that it is a true (or false) statement that you are holding this book in your hand? Or am I giving a command, such as “Do not commit euthanasia”? Or am I expressing a feeling, perhaps one that is shared with other people, but still just a feeling?

Of course, there are connections between these three approaches to morality, although just what the connections are is the subject of ongoing philosophical debate. For example, if moral judgments are simply expressions of feeling, rather than statements that can be correct or incorrect, is practical ethics pointless?

The idea that morality is grounded in human nature has been used in both normative ethics and metaethics. Morality relates not only to practical situations but to ideas about human nature and how “moral values” fit into our scientific conception of the world.

**Van Gogh depicts** an example of moral goodness in his painting *The Good Samaritan*. But what makes such actions good, and is “goodness” anything more than a reflection of our emotional responses?

## WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Morality presents itself as a guide to how we should live and act. There are three main theories in normative ethics (which concerns how people *should* behave, not how they do) that tell us what morality is all about, and help to describe what is important about living morally.

### Utilitarianism: be happy

The English philosopher and political thinker Jeremy Bentham (*see p.300*) has been described as the modern father of utilitarianism. He defended the “greatest happiness principle”, which claims that an action is right if, and only if, it leads to the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people it affects. As such, actions are judged not “in themselves” but in terms of what consequences they have. For example, a lie that maximized happiness would be morally good.

Bentham also argued that happiness is simply pleasure and the absence of pain, and that the total amount of happiness produced by an action is the sum total of everyone’s pleasures produced, minus the sum total of everyone’s pains.

Commenting on this theory, John Stuart Mill (*see pp.308–9*) argued that human happiness is more complex than Bentham thought. Pleasures and pains

are not all equally important; some types of pleasure are “higher” than others and more important to human happiness.

If everyone compares two pleasures and agrees that the first is “more desirable and valuable” than the second, then the first is a “higher” pleasure. To make one pleasure more valuable, people have to prefer it even if having that pleasure brings more pain with it.

#### HIGHER GROUND

As long as our basic needs are met, Mill thought, people will prefer the pleasures of thought, feeling, and imagination to pleasures of the body and the senses, even though our “higher” capacities also mean we can experience terrible pain, boredom, and dissatisfaction. For example, the pleasure of being in love carries the pain of longing and the potential pain of breaking up. But people still prefer being in love to a delicious dinner. This isn’t about quantity of pleasure, but about quality. Happiness is distinct from contentment or satisfaction.

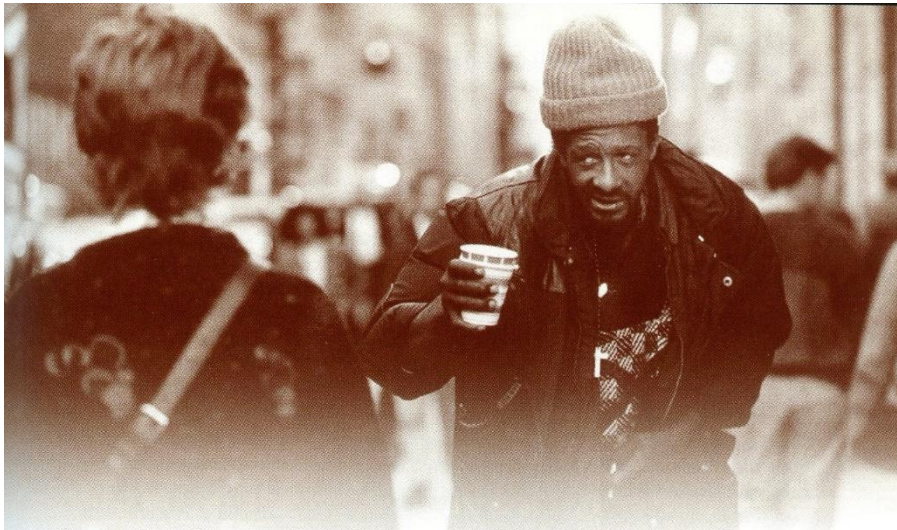
“BETTER TO BE A  
HUMAN BEING  
DISSATISFIED  
THAN A PIG  
SATISFIED.”

J. S. Mill, *On Utilitarianism*

Mill argued that happiness is partly about the quality of our pleasures. Humans have more valuable pleasures than do pigs.







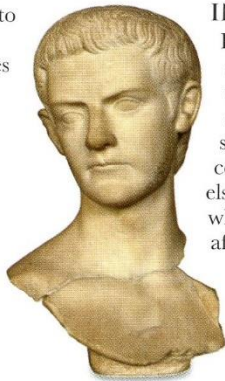
People often object to utilitarianism on the grounds that we can't foresee the consequences of an action, to discover whether it maximizes happiness or not. But we can easily reply that an action is right if we can reasonably expect that it will maximize happiness. Mill thought that we have a good sense of this from our inherited moral rules. These have developed as people have discovered which actions tend to produce happiness. Lying and stealing don't; keeping promises and being kind do.

### ACTS OF EVIL?

A serious problem with utilitarianism is that it doesn't rule out any type of action. If torturing a child produces the greatest happiness, then it is right to torture a child. Suppose a group of child abusers only find and torture abandoned children. Only the child suffers pain (no-one else knows about their activities). But the abusers derive a great deal of happiness. So more happiness is produced by torturing the child than not, so it is morally right. This is clearly unacceptable.

Utilitarians can reply that it is very probable that someone will find out, and then many people will be unhappy. But other people finding out isn't what makes torturing children wrong. Child abuse is morally bad in itself, we may argue.

Happiness is not always good, it seems, so morality can't be founded wholly upon the promotion of happiness.



**Enjoying cruelty,** as the Roman emperor Caligula did, is bad – not only because other people suffer, but because it is wrong “in itself”.

**Utilitarianism is often accused** of ignoring the question of justice. The greatest happiness does not necessarily involve happiness being distributed fairly, or provide for the needs of the vulnerable few.

Furthermore, because we are aiming only to maximize happiness, the distribution of happiness – who gets happy by how much – is irrelevant. This fails to respect justice.

### INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Finally, utilitarianism does not consider the special relation we have to our actions and our lives. In the utilitarian society, my happiness doesn't count any more than anyone else's when I'm considering what to do. Obviously, I am affected more often and more deeply by my actions than are other people – but that's all. The actions I take during my life are ultimately just a means of generating the greatest overall happiness.

This is objectionable.

Not only does it ignore the natural emphasis we place on our own wellbeing and that of those closest to us, it also makes morality too demanding. For example, every time I buy some music, I could have given the money to charity. That would create more happiness, since other people need food more than I need music. But because some people will always be in dire poverty, it will thus never be right for me to do something just for myself if I have more than the bare minimum I need to get by.

## Doing one's duty

Deontologists believe that morality is a matter of duty (the Greek word *deon* means "one must"). Duties are usually understood in terms of particular actions we must do or refrain from. It is the action itself that is right or wrong; it is not made right or wrong by its consequences. Actions are understood in terms of intentions. For example, a person may kill someone else, but not all "killings" are the same type of action, morally speaking. If the person deliberately intended to kill someone, that is very different from an accidental killing or if the person was only intending to defend themselves against an attack. Deontologists propose that we should judge whether an action is right or wrong by the agent's intention. This does not make moral judgment subjective. What matters is the real reason why the person chose to act as they did. It may be difficult to know what the real reason was, but that is a different point.

We each have duties regarding our own actions. I may have a duty to keep my promises, but I don't have a duty to make sure promises are kept. Deontology claims that we should



**Would it be wrong** to torture someone if we thought we could prevent some disaster? Deontology suggests that some acts are wrong in themselves, regardless of the consequences.

each be most concerned with complying with our own duties, not attempting to bring about the most good. In fact, all deontologists agree that there are times when we should not maximize the good, because doing so would be to violate a duty.

Most deontological theories recognize two classes of duties.

First, there are general duties towards other human beings.

These are mostly prohibitions: do not lie, do not murder, and so forth. But some may be positive, such as helping people in need. Second, there are duties we have because of the particular personal or social relationships we have with particular other people. For example, if you are a parent, you have a duty to provide for your children.

### OBJECTIONS TO DUTY

Utilitarians often object to deontology on the grounds that it is irrational. If it is my duty not to lie, this must be because

there is something bad about lying. But then, if lying is bad, surely we should try to ensure that there are as few lies as

possible. Utilitarianism views all reasoning about what to do as means-to-an-end reasoning: it is rational to do whatever brings about a good end. And surely more of something that is good is better. So, according to utilitarianism, I should prevent the proliferation of lies, even if that requires me to lie. Deontology rejects this view, and with it the means-to-an-end reasoning of utilitarianism.

Intuitionists (see p.114), such as the Scottish philosopher W. D. Ross, argue that there are several irreducible and distinct duties, and we have to use our moral intuition (an innate sense of the indefinable properties of goodness) to tell what these are. Other philosophers argue that our duty is to do what God commands (see p.107), which we may discover through scripture or by consulting our conscience.

### CONFLICTS OF DUTY

Does deontology provide any guidance when our duties appear to conflict? Most deontologists hold that a real conflict of duties can never occur. If there appears to be a conflict, we have misunderstood what at least one duty requires of us. So either duties never conflict, which means that we have to formulate our duties very carefully, or duties can "give way": in cases of conflict, one will yield and no longer be a duty in that situation. But then which duty should give way? Deontologists may reply that this lack of guidance is a strength of the theory. Choices in life are difficult and require insight.



## Grounding morality in reason

Immanuel Kant (*see pp.294–7*) argues that moral principles can be derived from practical reason alone. If this is true, he thought, we could explain the characteristics of morality. Morality, he claimed, is universal: a set of rules that are the same for everyone. It must be possible that everyone could act morally (even if it is very unlikely that they will). Reason, too, is universal, the same in all rational beings. Morality and rationality

are categorical; the demands to be rational and moral don't change depending on what we want. And we think that morality applies to all and only rational beings, not just human beings. Morality doesn't apply to beings that can't make rational choices, such as dogs and cats (pets may misbehave, but they don't act morally wrongly).

### MORAL MAXIMS

As rational animals, Kant argued, we make choices on the basis of "maxims". Maxims are Kant's version of intentions, our personal principles that embody our reasons for doing things, such as "to have as much fun as possible". If it is possible for everyone to act morally, and our actions are based on our maxims, then a maxim that is morally permissible must be one that everyone could act on.

Suppose you want to give a gift to a friend, but you can't afford it, so you steal it from a shop. Your maxim is something like: "To steal something I want if I can't afford it". This can only be the right thing to do if everyone could do it. But not everyone can: if we all just helped ourselves to whatever we wanted, the idea of "owning" things would disappear. Because you can't steal

**"MORAL LAWS  
HAVE TO  
HOLD FOR  
EVERY  
RATIONAL  
BEING AS  
SUCH."**

*Kant, Groundwork to a Metaphysics of Morals*

**Pinocchio's tendency** to bend the truth is wrong. Lying also fails Kant's test of universalizability. If everyone always lied, there would be no point in lying, because no one would believe you.







something that isn't owned by someone else it is logically impossible for everyone to steal things. And so stealing the gift is wrong, according to Kant.

We can discover our duties by testing our maxims against what Kant called the categorical imperative (an imperative being a command): "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law". Kant does not claim that an action, such as stealing, is wrong because we wouldn't like the consequences if everyone did it. His test is whether we could choose ("will") for our maxim to be a universal law. His test is about what it is possible to choose, not what we like to choose. Choosing to behave in a way that it is impossible for everyone to follow is both immoral and irrational, and should be rejected.

**Our ability to choose rationally** gives us all equal dignity and value, whoever we are and whatever circumstances – affluent or poor – we are in.

Kant also argued that we should "act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end". By using the word "humanity", Kant emphasizes our ability to rationally determine which ends to adopt and pursue. The ability to make free, rational choices gives human beings dignity.

To treat someone's humanity simply as a means, and not also as an end, is to treat the person in a way that undermines their power to make a rational choice themselves. Coercing someone or lying to them, and thus not allowing them to make an informed choice, are prime examples.

#### OBJECTIONS TO KANT

Philosophers have objected that Kant's categorical imperative is a flawed test. Couldn't any action be justified, as long as we phrase the maxim cleverly? In stealing a gift (see p.105), I could claim that my maxim is "To steal gifts when I am 30 years old". Universalizing this maxim, only people who are 30 can steal, and then only gifts. The case would apply so rarely that there would be no general breakdown in the concept of private property. So it would be perfectly possible for this law to apply to everyone. Kant's response is that his theory is

concerned with my actual maxim, not some made-up one. If I am honest with myself, I have to admit that being 30 isn't one of my reasons at all. However, Kant's test delivers strange results. Suppose a hard-working shop assistant, who hates the work, wins the lottery and vows "never to sell anything to anyone again, but only ever to buy". This doesn't seem morally wrong, but it cannot pass the test. If no-one ever sold things, how could anyone buy them? So perhaps it is not always wrong to do things that require other people to do something different.



## BECAUSE GOD SAYS SO

One reason for believing that certain types of action are right or wrong in themselves is because God wills it and has commanded us to do or not to do them. Since the observance of God's commands is a fundamental part of many major religions, philosophers have tried to establish whether it is a good reason: however, it faces a famous objection, developed from an argument in Plato's *Euthyphro*.

### DIVINE COMMAND

Is morality whatever God wills, or a set of values that God wishes us to adhere to because they are good? If goodness is independent of God, this places a moral restraint on God. However, if good is whatever God wills, then the idea of God being good doesn't say anything substantial about God; whatever God wills is by definition good. If goodness is whatever God wills, God invents morality. But if God has no independent reasons to will what he does, there is no rational structure to morality.



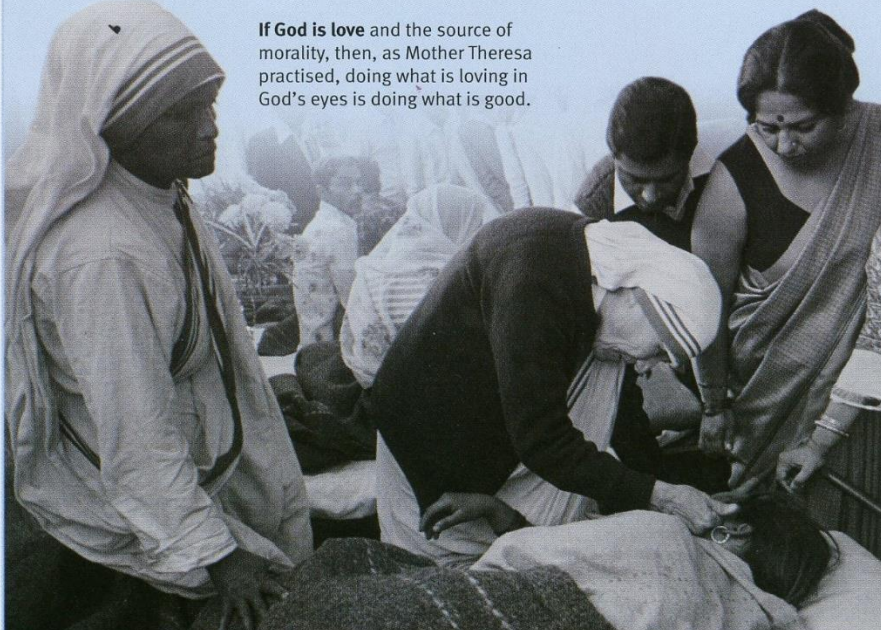
**Are God's commands** morally good simply because they are issued by God?

This would make morality arbitrary. Furthermore, it would then be right to slaughter innocent children if God willed it. Surely it is only right to do what God wills if what God wills is good? But how can we tell unless we have some independent standard of goodness?

One response to this is to say that God's will is not

arbitrary, because God is love. This doesn't make love the standard of morality by which to judge whether God's will is good, because the claim is not that the basis of morality is love, but that it is *God's* love.

**If God is love** and the source of morality, then, as Mother Theresa practised, doing what is loving in God's eyes is doing what is good.





## Virtue ethics

A virtuous person is someone who has morally good traits of character. We can argue that an action is right if it is an action that a virtuous person would take. A right action, then, will express morally good traits of character, and this is what makes it right. For example, telling the truth expresses honesty.

Character involves a person's dispositions that relate to what, in different circumstances, they would feel, how they think, how they react, and the sorts of choices they make and actions they perform. So someone is short-tempered if they are disposed to feel angry quickly and often, or intemperate if they get drunk often and excessively. A virtue of character is a character trait that disposes us to feel desires and emotions "well", rather than "badly".

Our main aim, therefore, should be to develop the virtues, because then we will know what it is right to do and we will want to do it. Aristotle (*see pp.248-9*) argues that virtues are qualities that help

a person to "live well": an achievement defined by human nature. His term for "living well" – *eudaimonia* – has been translated as "happiness", but the idea is closer to "flourishing". We have an idea of what it is for a plant or animal to "flourish", and we can provide an analysis of its needs and judge when those needs are met. According to virtue theory, moral philosophy should concern itself with defining similar conditions for growth in the lives of human beings. Living involves choosing and acting as a central part, but also involves the nature of one's relationships with others and the state of one's "soul".

### VIRTUE AND REASON

Because human beings are rational, for a human being to live well, he or she must live "in accordance with reason". If we feel emotions and desires, and make choices "well" (virtuously), we feel and choose "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right

**Some people**, such as Desmond Tutu, Gandhi, or the Dalai Lama, seem to demonstrate Aristotle's view that virtue is central to the "good life".





## ARE VIRTUES RELATIVE?

Different cultures have thought different traits to be “virtues”. The Victorians thought chastity was important, but it no longer has the same value in modern European culture. So, does virtue ethics entail relativism – the view that right and wrong are defined by culture alone? All human beings live in some culture or other, and the traits we need to be able to lead good lives in our own culture vary. However, many virtues are reflections of universal human nature: everyone needs courage, loyalty, temperance, and so on, because life throws the same challenges at us all. So some key virtues aren’t relative.

**The honour of women** in European cultures traditionally resided in chastity. Some virtues change status as cultures develop – but many do not.



people, with the right motive, and in the right way”. The virtue of practical wisdom helps us know what is “right” in each case. This knowledge is practical knowledge of how to live a good life. I need to be able to understand my situation and how to act in it. Yet circumstances always differ, and so, Aristotle argues, ethical understanding is not something that can be taught, for what can be taught is general, not particular. Rules and principles will rarely apply in any clear way to real situations. Instead, moral knowledge is only acquired through experience.

## THE MIDDLE WAY

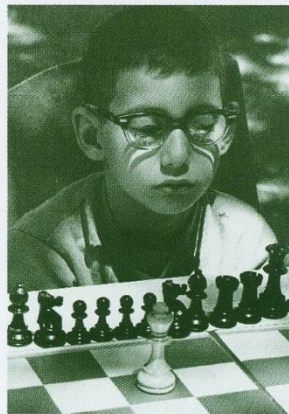
Aristotle defends the idea that a virtuous response or action is intermediate: just as there is a right time at which to feel angry (or any particular emotion), some people can feel angry too often, about too many things, towards too many people, and so on. Other people may not feel angry often enough, or with regard to enough objects and people (perhaps they don’t understand how people are taking advantage of them). The virtue is the intermediate state between the two vices of “too much”

and “too little”. This “doctrine of the mean” does not claim that when you get angry, you should only ever be moderately angry. You should be as angry as the situation demands.

The doctrine of the mean isn’t much help practically. First, “too much” and “too little” aren’t quantities on a single scale. Knowing the “right time, right object, right person, right motive, right way” is much more complicated than that. Second, there is no independent sense of “intermediate” that helps us answer the questions of how often we should get angry, and how angry we should get.

But virtue theory doesn’t aim to provide an exact method for making decisions. Practical wisdom is not a set of rules, but it does provide some kind of guidance.

It suggests we think about



**There are child prodigies** in chess, maths, and music, but never in morality. Aristotle argues that moral knowledge comes with experience.

situations in terms of the virtues. Rather than ask “Could everyone do this?”, as Kant suggests, or “What will bring about the best consequences?”, as utilitarianism suggests, we can ask a series of questions: “Would this action be kind/courageous/loyal...?” If we think of actions as expressions of virtue, this approach could be very helpful.





## AN EXERCISE IN PRACTICAL ETHICS

Stem cell research in its most controversial form involves removing an inner cell mass from, and thus destroying, a five- to seven-day-old embryo. These cells have the potential to become any type of cell: brain, heart, liver, bone. Researchers believe stem cells may help them to treat serious diseases, so we have a strong reason to pursue this research. But is it morally permissible to kill embryos for this reason?

### A RIGHT TO LIFE

Deontologists (*see p.104*) might ask if embryos have a right to life. If the embryo has a soul – traditionally said to be acquired at conception – it has a right to life. However, two out of three embryos are spontaneously aborted (rejected naturally by the uterus). If each has a soul, that seems a moral tragedy. Other grounds for believing human beings have a right to life – such as reason, the use of language, the depth of our emotional experience, our self-awareness, and our ability to distinguish right from wrong – are not things that an embryo has. But people with severe mental disabilities and senile dementia may also not have these characteristics, yet we do not normally think it is permissible to kill them. One important characteristic they do have is sentience, the basic consciousness of perception, pleasure, and pain. However, embryos do not have this capacity in the earliest stages of their development. So if the right to life depends on sentience, then week-old embryos do not have a right to life.

### A STOLEN FUTURE?

We may argue that the embryo has a right to life because it has the potential to become a person with a right to life in the future. However, it is not normal to treat potential as though it were already realized. Someone who has the potential to become a millionaire cannot spend



**Many people** are happy to eat meat, and yet believe humans have a sacred right to life. But are we different from animals? Stem cell research forces us to question our ethical assumptions.

the money yet. Furthermore, on its own, the embryo doesn't have the potential to become a person: we must implant it in a uterus first. Does it have a right to our help? A utilitarian (*see p.102*) may argue that we are depriving the embryo of future happiness. But the embryos used in stem cell research are the surplus embryos created in IVF (in vitro fertilization) programmes, which would otherwise be disposed of. If this objection has any bite, then it is as an objection to IVF treatment, which creates the embryos in the first place. However, preventing IVF treatment will prevent many couples from becoming happy, and will not grant life or happiness to any extra human embryos. Virtue

**Advances in the field** of genetic engineering have meant increased use of fertilized eggs for research and therapeutic purposes. But do we have the right to "tamper" with life in this way?

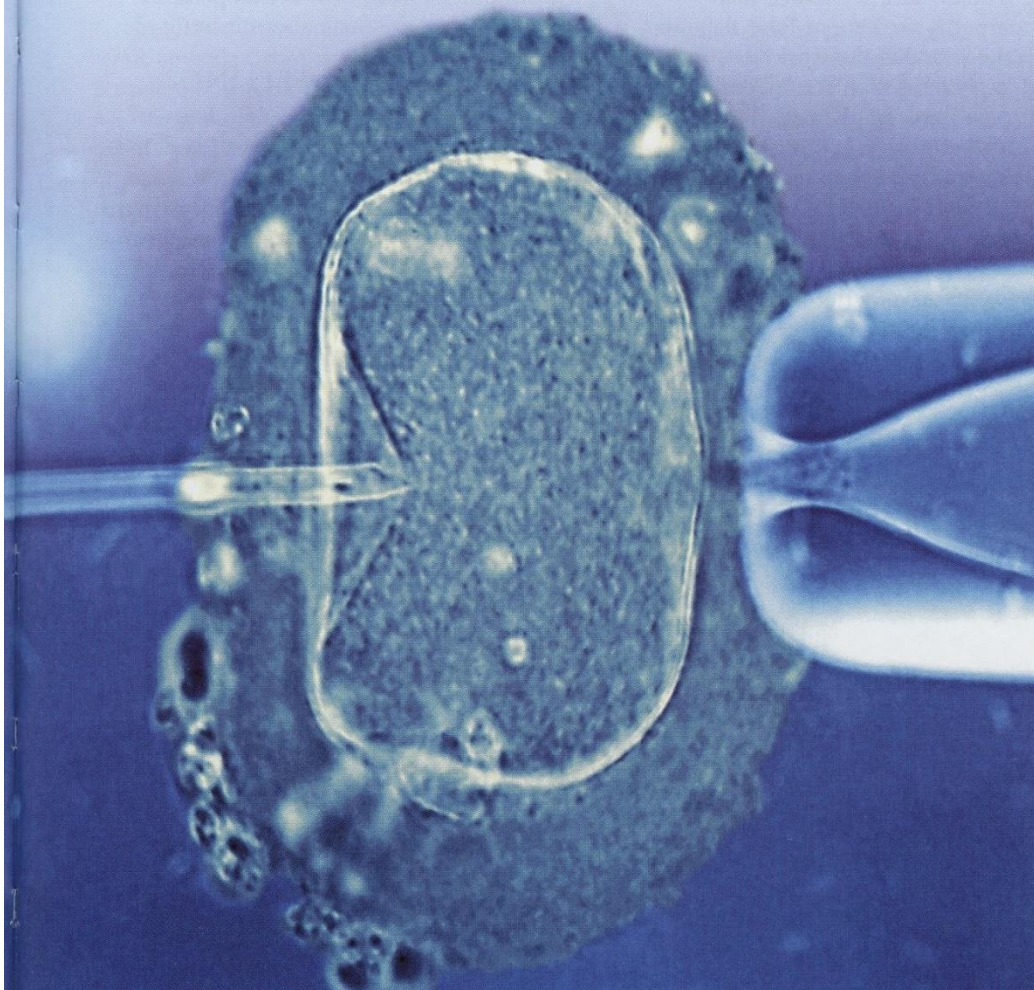


theory (see p.108) would comment that the meaning of creating and using a human life – in embryonic form – has not been properly explored. Embryos share our “flesh and blood”, and it would be callous or disrespectful to create a human life just in order to benefit another life. However, these embryos are created in IVF programmes. So do

the benefits granted by IVF treatment justify the expense, the creation of many embryos, and so on? Does IVF change the meaning of parenthood for the worse? If we allow that IVF is permissible, then to use embryos that would otherwise die in order to benefit other human beings seems an expression of compassion towards those who will benefit.

“THAT IN THE SOUL WHICH IS CALLED  
THE MIND IS, BEFORE IT THINKS,  
NOT ACTUALLY ANY REAL THING.”

*Aristotle, On the Soul*





Questions:

1. What are the three different ways of thinking about morals?
2. What does the theory of utilitarianism suggest as the most important aim when considering an action?
3. What are the weaknesses of utilitarianism? Can you think of two problems?
4. Is Deontology better? Is it better to judge an action on what is intended rather than the actual outcome?
5. Kant suggests that moral rules should be universal – they should apply to all people at all times. Do you agree?
6. Is it easier to do something because God says so? What is the problem with this approach?
7. Lots of people like Virtue Ethics – but can this approach be taught? Could we teach it to pupils in school?
8. Read through the exercise in practical ethics on pages 110-111. Stem cell research has further advanced since this book was written, but some of the ethical debates are still relevant. What do you think? What are your views on the issues raised here?