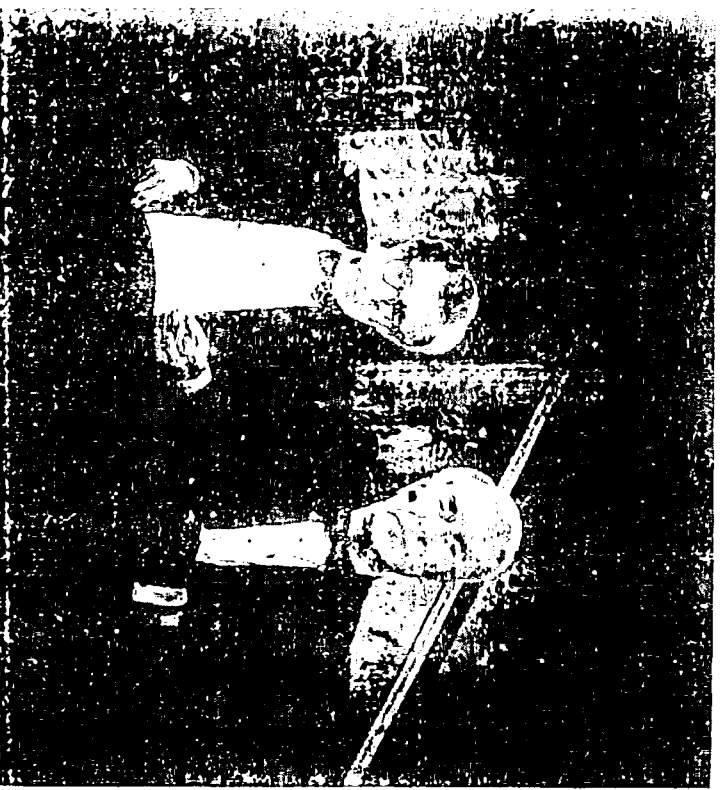


CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS -
MORAL PHILOSOPHY



Woody Allen and Martin Landau in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.
Credit: Orion (Courtesy Kobal)

At the end of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (Woody Allen, 1989), the distinguished doctor Judah Rosenthal (Martin Landau) meets film-maker Cliff Stern (Allen) at a wedding and tells him he has a story that would make a great movie plot. The story is of a successful man whose mistress is threatening to reveal the affair and ruin his marriage and career. He decides he has no choice but to have her killed. After the deed is done he feels terrible guilt, and imagines that he has sinned in the eyes of God. He is an inch away from confessing all to the police. But then one morning he awakens and the crisis has passed; he is no longer guilt-stricken, and as the months pass he finds he is not punished, but in fact prospers. Now, his life is completely back to normal. It is the perfect murder. To Stern's misgivings about this tale he replies 'well, I said it was a chilling story, didn't I?' In fact, we in the audience know that it is more than just a good story for a film, that what he is relating has actually happened, and that the man in the story is the doctor himself. The question being raised here is not just whether the doctor did the morally right thing in the circumstances (most of us, of course, would think he did not). A deeper question is being asked: why should we be moral in the first place? Why should we do the right thing if we can do the wrong thing and get away with it? This calls on us to think about the very nature of morality, about the role it plays and its importance in our lives. So let us consider this question of why we should be moral, which will in turn lead us to a consideration of some of the more important philosophical accounts of morality.

The ring of Gyges

We can begin by stating the issue clearly. Suppose I find myself able to acquire something I desperately want, provided I lie, steal or perhaps kill someone. We are all familiar with those moments when we find ourselves wanting to do something even though we know we shouldn't, or not wanting to do something even though we feel that we ought. We are torn between getting what we want and sticking to moral principles. The tension here is sometimes characterized as being one between self-interest and morality, between acting purely to satisfy my own interests regardless of others, and doing the right thing. In such cases it might be thought that the moral considerations are the ones that ought to win out, and that in a morally good person they will. Surely, we imagine, even those who profess to be concerned only with pursuing their own interests will recognize the force of moral considerations. Perhaps they have been made cynical by circumstances, but when it counts they will come good. So we are not surprised for example when Humphrey Bogart's character Rick, the night-club owner in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), initially someone whose only concern is to look out for his own interests, who 'sticks his neck out for nobody', turns into a supporter of the Resistance, willing to sacrifice much for the cause, even the woman he loves. Indeed, remarks by the police prefect Captain Renault (Claude Rains) make it clear early on that Rick was an idealist in the past, a supporter of anti-Fascist struggles, and that it is only circumstances that have made him bitter and cynical. We are sure that he will eventually return to the fight.

This kind of transformation, from someone who for whatever reason is only concerned to 'get by' even if it means being complicit with great evil, into a person of moral integrity, willing to make a stand, is a familiar cinematic theme. In *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954) Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) is transformed from a washed-up boxer who runs errands for the corrupt waterfront union boss into someone willing to stand up against the corruption. In *Fahrenheit 451* (François Truffaut, 1966) Montag (Oskar Werner), the 'fireman' who burns books in a future totalitarian society, turns from obediently serving the state to questioning and ultimately opposing it. In *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), World War Two businessman Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) evolves from an opportunist and profiteer into a man of conscience, saving Jews from the concentration camps by bringing them to work in his factory. In each case, it is very much in the interests of the individuals involved to stay quiet, to co-operate; the path they decide to take

purs them at considerable risk, and yet they find they cannot do otherwise. All these films embody the reassuring view that moral considerations have a certain force, that such considerations should take precedence over those to do with one's immediate comfort, desire and self-interest, and that even if they don't always do so, in good people at least they will eventually prevail.

And yet the question remains: why should one be moral? Why should moral considerations take precedence over, say, considerations of self-interest? People do not always act in a moral way; and if it is going to cost someone dearly if they do the right thing, or if they stand to gain a great deal of benefit from immoral actions, what sort of reason could there be for their continuing to abide by moral standards? What are we to say to someone who thinks that self-interest is the only realistic guide to conduct, and who regards anyone constrained by moral considerations as a fool? This is the view presented for example by Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas), the ruthless, predatory corporate raider in *Oliver Stone's Wall Street* (1987). *Wall Street* is one of a number of films that criticized the rampant consumerism and acquisitiveness so prevalent in the West in the 1980s (Mike Leigh's 1988 *High Hopes* is another). In the film, Gekko sums up the attitude of unapologetic self-interest in his 'greed is good' speech, delivered to a group of stockholders. According to Gekko, not only is greed nothing to apologize for, greed in its many forms, for life, love, wealth and knowledge, is nothing less than the driving force of human evolution and progress. His contempt for those like his protégé Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen), who find themselves bound by ethical standards, is palpable. Now we might want to dismiss Gekko's views because he is so obviously the villain of the film; but this fails to address what he has to say. His claim is that self-interest is, and indeed should be, the major factor guiding our conduct. What are we to say to this?

To further explore this issue, we can turn once again to Plato. Plato is in fact the first philosopher to raise the question of why one should be moral. He does this in *Book 2 of the Republic* (1974, 358-68), by way of a fable about the Ring of Gyges. Gyges, a poor shepherd from Lydia, found a ring that had the power to make the wearer invisible. Using this ring, he seduced the Lydian queen, plotted with her to kill the king, and, taking over his position, became wealthy and powerful. So here, Plato raises the question of why we should be moral in a very strong way, because he removes even the motivation to be good that might come from the fear of being caught and punished. The ring means that Gyges can get away with anything he likes. And through this story, means that Gyges can get away with anything he likes. And through this story, a certain view of morality and human nature is also being put forward for

consideration, a view that Getko would surely approve of. In the last analysis, it is implied, we only do the right thing because if we don't we will be caught and punished; and if we could in fact do whatever we wanted, without fear of being found out, we would abandon all ethical standards and set about pursuing our self-interest. Moreover, it is being suggested, we would be perfectly rational in doing so. Only a fool would continue to do what is right under such circumstances.

An updated version of the Gyges story appears in *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993). Here Phil (Bill Murray), a cynical weatherman, finds himself waking up on the same day, over and over again. This means that he can do anything he wishes and get away with it, because his actions have no lasting consequences; tomorrow, whatever he has done will be erased and the day will begin again. Realizing this, his initial response to his situation is very Gyges-like. He proclaims 'I'm not going to live by their rules any more', i.e., the rules of ordinary, well-behaved citizens. So saying, he embarks on a night of automotive mayhem. Where this tale differs from Plato's story is that, since *Groundhog Day* is a conventional Hollywood film, there is a more comforting outcome. As the film progresses, our hero travels the standard path of development from amoral cynic into a morally decent person. Hollywood remains fond of the happy ending in which the moral world is reassuringly confirmed; and where those who do wrong, if they fail to improve, are at least found out and punished. Even in quite unconventional portrayals of evil such as David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), and Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), evil has still been properly punished by the end. Both *Blue Velvet*'s crazed gangster Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper) and Michel Gambon's brutal Thief end up being killed by those they have tormented and abused. However there are some movies whose interest lies precisely in reminding us that in the 'real world' it is not always so, that evil in fact quite often goes unpunished. In so doing, they pose the question of why one should be moral with renewed force.

Take for example Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), the noirish detective story mentioned towards the end of Chapter 1. The film is striking in its willingness to allow wickedness to triumph. Although private eye Gittes uncovers a network of graft, murder and incest, neither he nor the police have the power to do anything about it. And it is a similarly uncompromising treatment of this theme that we find in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. The doctor has his mistress killed when she threatens to expose their affair and ruin his life, and, quite simply, he gets away with it. This film is particularly interesting in

the present context because along the way, as the doctor agonizes over what to do about his mistress, various views are put forward as to why one should be moral. We will have an opportunity to look at these in a moment. For now, one aspect worth noting is that the film also manages to comment on the conventional Hollywood resolution, in which good prevails and evil deeds are paid for. In the final scene of the film, when as we've seen the murderous doctor meets Allen's film-maker at the wedding and recounts his story in the guise of a film plot, Allen replies that it would be a better story if the murderer were driven by guilt to give himself up. The doctor's reply is that this is what happens in the movies, not in real life: 'If you want a happy ending, you should go see a Hollywood movie'. Robert Altman's satirical *The Player* (1992) similarly mocks the Hollywood taste for happy endings by providing one for the villain: when a studio executive (Tim Robbins) kills a writer he thinks (wrongly) has been sending him death threats, not only does he get away with it, but he ends up happily married to the dead writer's girlfriend, in the most idyllic of circumstances.

If we are going to be realistic, we need to acknowledge that wrongdoing is not always found out and punished, that people can and do get away with evil. So we need to ask whether there is any reason for behaving morally if we can get away with being immoral. Is it true that the only reason people adhere to ethical standards is because of fear of being caught and punished if they do not? Or can we give a better answer to the question of why we should be moral? One response might be that even if we can avoid external punishment, we will suffer at our own hands for evil deeds, through guilt or remorse. On this view it is our conscience that keeps us on the 'straight and narrow'. However conscience is not as strong a force as one might think. Given some of the things people do, it is clear that not everyone is constrained by their consciences. Even those who think they are may be less constrained than they imagine, once they find that their acts go undiscovered and unpunished. This is what the murderous doctor of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* discovers. While recounting his tale, he indicates that although he suffered deep-seated guilt at first, to the point where he was close to a mental collapse and on the verge of confessing to the police, the guilt diminished as time went by, and even if he occasionally has a bad moment he has learnt to live with it. As he goes on to point out, people learn to live with all sorts of terrible sins. And over and above these considerations, even if conscience does prod us, a simple appeal to the force of conscience does not tell us why we should obey it, what justifies the belief that we ought to do so. We need to go more deeply into the issue.

Plato and inner balance

We have seen how Plato's Ring of Gyges story poses the question of why we should be moral in a very strong way. Plato himself invokes the Ring of Gyges story because he wants to reject the view of morality and human nature it implies, the view that the only reason to abide by ethical standards is to avoid being caught and punished, and that if we could do whatever we wanted, without fear of punishment, we would abandon all morality and pursue our self-interest. The rest of the *Republic* is in effect his answer to the question of why we should be moral even if we can get away with being immoral, and in the course of this, he puts forward his own view of morality.

Plato's response to the question of why one should be moral is to argue that self-interest is not really in conflict with morality. The apparent conflict between morality and self-interest is really only a conflict between morality and a false notion of self-interest. This false notion of self-interest in turn rests on a false notion of the self, in which the self is identified with one's immediate desires alone (see Irwin 1989, 102). Plato's position thus turns on his conception of the self. As we saw in Chapter 2, Plato understands the self or soul as being composed of three parts, a rational part, a desiring element and a spirited part. Each has its proper function in the whole. In a properly balanced soul, the rational part rules. With the help of the spirited part, reason governs and directs the non-rational desires. By themselves, the non-rational desires cannot be trusted to pursue my real interests. I may have a desire to drink the water, but the rational part, which knows that the water is poisoned, is able to judge what is good for me as a whole and prevent me from drinking. The rational part looks at the overall picture, at what is good for the self as a whole and for each part. So if I am really self-interested, I must be ruled by the rational part; I must have a properly balanced soul, and for Plato, having this inner balance is what it is to be moral.

Plato's answer, then, to the question of why one should be moral – spelt out in Book Four of the *Republic* – is that being moral, far from being opposed to self-interest, in fact benefits the soul. Being moral means having a harmonious, well-ordered soul in which the various parts are organized by the rational part for the good of each part and for the good of the whole. Moral goodness thus amounts to a kind of mental health or well-being, and mental health in general is clearly something that benefits the possessor. Moreover it is a state that we not only need to be in for our own good but which we also enjoy being in, and so Plato can argue that the moral life is not

only desirable but also happy. In this well-ordered, harmonious condition, Plato argues, we have the additional virtues of courage, temperance and wisdom. We are wise because the ruling element possesses knowledge of what is advantageous for each part and for the whole; temperate, or self-controlled, because spirit and desire are subordinate to the ruling part, and there is no rebellion against it; and brave because the spirited part allows us to pursue the precepts of reason, and to overcome the distractions of pain and pleasure (see Plato 1974, 436–44).

If we were not morally good in this sense of being well-balanced we could not pursue our own interests. We would not do what is good for us overall, but would instead be subject to the tyrannical demands of our desires, desires that have grown out of all proportion, have lost touch with reality and are out of control. Other people would suffer as well, for the pressure of our desires would distort our relations with others. Driven by our obsessive desires, we would no longer respond to the wants and needs of others, no longer treat them as persons in their own right. We would be driven to satisfy ourselves at their expense, for example to seek unlimited sexual pleasure through force or deception. The immoral person is thus unbalanced, at the mercy of their desires, and the thoroughly immoral person is close to being a madman. On this view Mr Hyde becomes the very model of evil, the evil that results when desire escapes from rational control and gains ascendancy. The cinematic vampire is another figure of evil that is in the grip of uncontrollable, bestial desire. And the idea that extreme wickedness implies an unbalanced, obsessive, out-of-control personality is evident in a whole line of monstrous criminals, from Peter Lorre's child murderer Hans Beckert in *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931), who 'cannot help what he does' and has no control over 'this evil thing that's inside of me', to the raging, uncontrollable Frank Booth in Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, consumed by libidinal desire and aggression.

Plato's account of morality is bound up not only with his conception of the self but also with his account of knowledge. As we saw in the first chapter, for Plato, to comprehend the true nature of things is to have knowledge of the forms, the timeless, unchanging essences of things that exist beyond the shifting world of sense experience. Now these include the forms of moral ideals and virtues, wisdom, courage, temperance and, above all, the form of the good. What Plato is saying is that there is one universal, objective form of the good life, which we can discover through our reason. Accordingly, discovering the good life is a rational task, like determining the principles of mathematics. It is through this knowledge that the rational part knows

how to live well, what is good for the person overall. Moreover, although Plato's moral theory seems to be based on a notion of self-fulfilment or self-realization, on achieving the kind of balance that is proper to ourselves, we can only fulfil ourselves through knowledge of these timeless forms, and above all, through knowledge of the good. Individual harmony and order thus mirrors the larger order of the world of forms. So in the last analysis, the basis of morality for Plato is not to be found in human nature but in his conception of ultimate, objective reality, the world of the forms.

Plato's view of morality involves the emphasis on reason that we have already seen in his views on knowledge and the self. And many have found his moral account too intellectualistic and rationalistic. Can we know what the right thing to do is, in the way that we can have mathematical or scientific knowledge? Is establishing the right thing to do, or the proper life to lead, anything like gaining knowledge of the world? Equally, is there really only one correct answer to what it is to lead the good life, which reason can discover, as Plato seems to imply? Might there not be a variety of ways in which one can be good? Furthermore, as we saw in the previous chapter, Plato's emphasis on reason means that his notion of mental harmony is a rather repressive, authoritarian one, marked by suspicion and hostility towards desire. What this means for morality is that being moral, living the good life, requires firmly controlling and restraining the desires. It is an ascetic morality, a morality of stern self-denial. And as has already been suggested, this kind of moral authoritarianism might be less a recipe for mental health than itself a source of disharmony and illness. The virtuous but repressed Dr Jekyll is not a particularly appealing alternative to the evil Mr Hyde. The Platonic hostility towards desire was also taken up in the Christian conception of moral life, as a struggle between the aspiration to the good and the distractions of worldly desire. This is another austere moral picture that identifies virtue with self-denial and privation, and which we may want to question for just that reason.

We will come to a more sustained discussion of Christian ethics in a moment, but two other aspects of Plato's account are worth commenting on. First, Plato equates being morally good with having a well-ordered self, and moral evil with internal disorder. Yet it might be argued against Plato that one might be utterly dedicated to evil yet still have a well-ordered, disciplined, harmonious soul. There is nothing in self-mastery itself that implies one has to be morally good. To put this objection in a slightly different way, what Plato's account seems to value most of all is self-mastery and temperance, but these are not in themselves

moral values. Someone could have a harmonious self and yet not necessarily be morally good. The theory makes single-mindedness the central virtue, but couldn't there be a person who single-mindedly pursued moral evil? Indeed, the greatest crimes would surely be impossible without such single-mindedness and self-mastery. This is why Aaron Goeth (Ralph Fiennes), the Nazi concentration camp commandant in *Schindler's List*, does not quite ring true as a symbol of Nazi evil. He is monstrous, ruled by sadistic impulses, close to being insane, but the Holocaust is a crime that required sober self-discipline and single-mindedness to carry out. The combination of self-mastery and enormous evil is precisely what makes some other recent cinematic monsters so intriguing: figures like Anthony Hopkins' Dr Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), the refined cannibal who kills and mutilates his victims to the music of Bach, and Kevin Spacey's serial killer in *Seven* (David Fincher, 1995), whose meticulously planned murders are based on the seven deadly sins. These monsters are intelligent, single-minded and fully in control of themselves; indeed, their particular crimes would not be possible without an almost superhuman self-discipline.

Second, Plato presumes that if we acquire the appropriate knowledge, and develop virtuous habits based on reason, we will lead the good life. Immorality is primarily due to ignorance. But this may be an over-optimistic picture, one that is too confident of the power of reason. People who have lived a moral life can still come to do immoral things. They do these things even if they know what is right, even if they know that what they are doing is wrong. In these cases, we might say that they suffer from weakness of will, an inability to resist temptation; but this also means that their rationality does not seem to have given them sufficient incentive to be good. In a cinematic context the male hero's inability to resist the woman he knows to be 'dangerous' or 'forbidden' is a recurring theme in film noir and has reappeared in a number of more recent films. See *Of Love* (Harold Becker, 1989) and *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) feature cynical, hard-boiled detectives (Al Pacino and Michael Douglas, respectively) who become attracted, despite their better judgement, to murder suspects. Male anxiety and paranoia over this loss of control reach fever pitch in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) where a married man (Michael Douglas) falls for a book editor (Glenn Close) and gets more than he bargained for when he tries to end it: his transgression calls forth a vengeful monster who terrorizes him and his family. Plato has no room in his account for those who choose a path at odds with what they know to be good or right. However, that we can know the good and yet choose not to abide

by it is something that is acknowledged in the Christian conception of morality, and it's to this that we now turn.

Religion and morality

With the coming of Christianity a new view of morality emerged, a religious conception of morality that was to dominate Western thinking throughout the medieval period. Even today there are many for whom morality is impossible without a religious basis. This is the view expressed by Ivan in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, when he proclaims that 'if God does not exist, everything is permissible'; and repeated by Sonia (Diane Keaton) in Woody Allen's Russian novel parody *Love and Death* (1975), when she tells her cousin Boris (Allen): 'Let's say that there is no God and each man is free to do exactly as he chooses: well, what prevents you from murdering someone?' Behind such claims is a profoundly God-centred understanding of the world and morality, one that emerged out of both the Jewish and Christian traditions. In these traditions God is presented as the law-giver who has fashioned the world and us for a purpose. That purpose is revealed to us, at least to some extent, through the Scriptures and the Church. According to these sources, in order to guide us in the right way of living God has formulated certain rules, certain duties we are to obey. We are not compelled to obey them, for we have been created as free agents, and so we can know the good and choose not to abide by it. It is up to us to decide whether to accept or reject these rules. Nonetheless, these rules tell us how we ought to live.

So on this religious view of morality, moral rules are God's laws, his commandments. This line of thinking has been spelt out by some theologians as the 'divine command' theory of morality. Morally right means that which is commanded by God; and morally wrong means that which is forbidden by God. Whereas for Plato being moral was a matter of achieving a certain kind of virtuous, internally balanced character, righteous living now becomes a matter of obedience to the divine commandments. To be moral is to be the obedient child of God. And Christian ethics offers us a new kind of reason for being moral, for following the rules of morality rather than simply pursuing our own interests. If moral rules are the commandments of God, and immorality means disobeying God, then on the day of final reckoning we will be held accountable for what we have done. This theistic perspective appears in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, in the course of the doctor's reflections on

whether he should have his mistress killed, as the main alternative to the view that being immoral is alright if you can get away with it. It is represented by the doctor's patient and friend, Rabbi Ben (Sam Waterston), and by his father, who appears in flashbacks. God sees everything, says his father, and those who are righteous will be rewarded while those who are wicked will be punished for eternity. The rabbi echoes this view, and adds that we need a God-given moral law, for if there is no higher power, or moral structure with real meaning, then all we have is an empty, valueless world.

The idea that moral rules are an expression of God's will is not however without its problems. This view of morality depends, of course, on a belief in God and the validity of the Scriptures. If this belief is questioned, it is undermined. But even if we accept the religious position, it is not clear how we are to establish what God's will actually is, what God in fact commands. The scriptures are not always consistent and are open to considerable interpretation, as are miracles, dreams and other signs that might be invoked. The problem becomes acute if the will of God is invoked in order to justify what to ordinary observers seem to be evil, cruel or in other ways questionable acts. How do we know that those who invoke it are not simply mistaken or deluded, or perhaps rationalizing what they do? The ferocious inquisitor Bernardo Gui (F. Murray Abraham) in *The Name of the Rose* may claim theological justification for his acts of torture and killing, but how can we be certain that he is doing the will of God? How can we be sure that there is any real difference between him and the ignorant, hysterical witch-hunters of seventeenth-century Salem portrayed so effectively in *The Crucible* (Nicholas Hytner, 1996)? They also are convinced they are acting in the name of God. Similarly, when the papal official in *The Mission* (Roland Joffé, 1986) informs the South American Indians that it is the 'will of God' that they be turned out of the Jesuit mission and left to the mercy of the Portuguese slave-traders, we, like the Indians' leader, want to ask: 'How does he know he knows God's will?'

A second problem with the divine command view of morality is that it only works if we accept that God is good. And if we consider the existence of worldly evils such as violence, cruelty and premature death, this seems to raise questions about the unqualified goodness of God. This is one of the issues raised in the film *The Rapist* (Michael Tolkin, 1991). Here, bored telephone operator Sharon (Mimi Rogers) finds religion and, after the murder of her husband, hears God's call to go out into the desert to await the second coming. Once there, she murders her daughter to send her more quickly to heaven. What makes this film interesting is that it does not dismiss the central

character as a deluded fanatic, but instead accepts fundamentalist religious premises. The issue now is that the woman finds herself unable to be reconciled with a God who could let her kill her child, and who allows 'so much suffering, so much pain on the earth he created'. God may forgive us, she says, but who is to forgive God? A similar problem arises in Ingmar Bergman's medieval tale *The Virgin Spring* (1959), in which Tore (Max von Sydow) takes brutal revenge on shepherds who raped and killed his daughter. Afterwards, he wonders how God could have allowed him to do such a terrible thing. As it happens, the film ends with a miracle (a spring appears at the site where the daughter was murdered) which seems to indicate divine forgiveness for his actions. So here, in contrast to *The Rapture*, God is reconciled with the evil he seems to allow. The problem is not really resolved though, because this reconciliation is only made possible at the cost of God becoming an utterly mysterious, inscrutable figure (as he so often is in Bergman's films). And such a view of God is also cold comfort for the divine command theory, since it makes the issue of how we can know God's will even more problematic.

These difficulties caused by the presence of worldly evil are part of a more general difficulty, the so-called problem of evil, which is the problem of reconciling the idea of a good, all-powerful God with the cruelty, pain, disease and suffering that afflicts us in this world. If God is good and all-powerful he could surely spare us from these evils. For some, the presence of such evil represents an argument against the very existence of God. Others have tried to argue in various ways that God and worldly evil are reconcilable (the part of theology that tries to do this is known as theodicy). One way of trying to reconcile the two is by holding that what seems evil is 'for the better' in the longer term, perhaps because it allows us to perfect our souls, and so it is all part of God's plan. In *The Rapture*, this is how the central character first tries to come to terms with evil, when her husband is murdered. Another way of trying to reconcile God and worldly evil is to argue that since God created human beings with free will, it is people, not God, who choose to bring evil into the world. However both these responses have had their critics, for whatever story we tell about evil, we can still ask why a benevolent, all-powerful God allows so much evil, and does not intervene to at least lessen it. Yet another way out here might be to argue that God is not good, but is in fact a malevolent deity. But this means that a significant aspect of the Christian notion of God has to be abandoned, and of course it would cause severe problems for the divine command theory of morality, which as we've seen depends on God being good.

There is one further problem with the divine command theory, which as James Rachels points out (1993, 47-50), has to do with how it formulates the very notions of 'good' and 'evil'. On this account, there is no reason why God cannot command what seem to us to be hideously evil acts like murder. We cannot say that a good God would never command such an evil act, because it is God's will that determines whether an act is good or bad. Thus, if God commanded us to murder, murder would be the right thing to do. But this also means that God's commands are entirely arbitrary. He has no more reason to command an action than to forbid it. Moreover, the very idea that God is good is destroyed on this view. If good and bad are determined by God's will, then to say that God's commands are good is only to say that God's commands are commanded by God, which is an empty statement. One way of dealing with this problem might be to drop the idea that an action is right because God commands it, and to hold instead that God commands an action because it is right. God has the infinite wisdom to know what is right and what is wrong, and in the light of this knowledge commands the right conduct. However this approach has its own difficulties because it seems to make a religion-based conception of morality unnecessary, because it seems to require in order to make an action right or wrong. There God is no longer required in order to make an action right or wrong. There are standards of right and wrong independent of God's will, which God himself has to adhere to. Thus, what is distinctively theological about this account of morality seems to disappear. The eighteenth-century philosopher Kant certainly held that God himself has to obey moral principles determined independently of the divine will, so let us look at Kant's moral theory.

Kant: doing one's duty

If the Christian world-view was dominant during the medieval period, the modern period has seen the increasing undermining of traditional religious belief. Religion has not disappeared, of course. It continues to exert an influence, and to provide a moral perspective. But it is a disdistinguishing mark of our modernity that we no longer appeal so readily to religious authority to back up our guiding principles. And despite the claims of Dostoevsky and others that God is the only basis for morality, and that if we abandon God all will be permitted, there are post-religious ways of thinking about and justifying morality, forms of moral thinking that sit more comfortably with the modern outlook. This is an outlook in which human beings have replaced

God as the centre of reference; and morality now turns to various conceptions of human nature for its basis.

One such account is provided by Kant. In his *Groundwork* he provides us with an account of morality that no longer looks to God as the law-giver who provides us with rules. Instead, Kant looks to reason, or more precisely, to human beings understood primarily as rational beings. Morality is no longer obedience to God, but to our own rational conscience. We ourselves are the law-givers who establish the moral rules. That is, we, through our rationality, legislate moral rules for ourselves. This is not however a return to Plato's kind of rationalist morality. It is true that for Plato the moral person is the one who obeys the commands of reason, but Plato located the ultimate basis for morality in objective ideals, the forms, that reason is able to comprehend. For Kant, the basis for moral authority is not objective forms outside of us, but human beings themselves insofar as they are rational beings. We saw in Chapter 1 how for Kant, human reason provides the organizing forms or categories in terms of which we organize our experience and acquire knowledge of the world. His moral theory follows on from this, insofar as reason also determines the forms or principles in terms of which we are to organize our practical conduct, and live the moral life. So on Kant's view, moral rules are rational laws, the commands of one's own reason - what Kant calls 'the moral law within'. And with this account, we have another answer to the question 'why be moral?' The reason we should be moral, rather than pursuing our immediate wants and desires, is that only in doing so are we living up to our proper status as rational beings. There is a lot going on here, so we need to explore Kant's account in more detail.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant starts with the familiar idea that moral considerations have a special force, and that they should outweigh other considerations. For Kant, however, the moral is typically experienced in the form of the stern voice of duty, commanding us to put pleasure or personal interest aside, and to do the right thing whatever the consequences. He sees it as a matter of our ordinary moral experience that we distinguish between duty and personal interest or desire, and that we generally consider that doing our duty, doing what is right, should take precedence over merely personal interest, desires and inclinations. Whether or not ordinary moral experience is always like this, we certainly get a taste of this idea of morality in *High Noon* (Fred Zimmermann, 1952). Here town marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) waits for the return of an outlaw, who once terrorized the town, on the midday train. It was Kane who arrested him and sent him to prison, and now he is coming

back to take his revenge. Kane cannot leave, even though he has been deserted by his new bride and by the townspeople he has served for years, and has been left to confront the killer alone. He stays in order to do his duty as town marshal, to uphold the law. He is heroic, but it is not the desire for glory that motivates him. When his bride Amy (Grace Kelly) asks him whether he is trying to be a hero, he replies: 'I'm not trying to be a hero. If you think I like this, you're crazy.' He simply has to stay, to do his duty, putting aside all other considerations including his own wishes and feelings. Other films can be interpreted in these terms as well, particularly if they involve an element of stern self-denial. For example, we could see *Casablanca* as portraying the triumph of duty over desire, when Rick gives up the woman most dear to him for the sake of the higher cause, the struggle against Fascism.

Kant seeks in his moral theory to analyse, explain and defend this notion of duty as something that outweighs all other considerations. He argues first of all that the consequences of our acts have no bearing on the moral worth of our actions, only the motivations behind them. This is not implausible. To go back to *High Noon*, in the end Kane succeeds in killing the outlaw he has been waiting for, but even if he himself had been killed, his actions would presumably still be worthy of moral praise. What is praiseworthy is the stand he takes, regardless of the consequences of doing so, regardless of whether he succeeds or fails. Second, Kant argues that only those actions that are motivated by a sense of duty, that are done 'for duty's sake', are moral actions. Again, this is not implausible. Certainly in *High Noon*, Kane's actions seem particularly moral and worthy because he does what he does simply because it is the 'right thing to do'. We don't feel the same way about Kane's friend and deputy Harvey Pell (Lloyd Bridges), when he offers to stand by Kane provided Kane gets him the job as the next marshal (Kane's reply: 'I want you to stick - but I'm not buying it. It's got to be up to you'). However we may not want to go quite as far as Kant in this regard. For Kant, it is not only actions done out of self-interest, desire or inclination that are to be excluded from the realm of the moral. Even an action done out of love or compassion, while it may be praiseworthy, is not a moral action. We will return to this issue in a moment.

Kant goes on to argue that when we are acting out of a sense of duty, when we are obligated by moral laws, we are acting in accordance with our rationality. For Kant, reason is capable of formulating these laws or principles of conduct, of generating rules for living; which is also to say that moral principles are rational in character. So how does reason establish moral principles?

To be moral, for Kant, is to act in accordance with principles that are binding not just on me but also on all rational beings. After all, something cannot be rational for me and not for you. So in order to act morally we need to determine that the principle we are thinking of acting on is universalizable, i.e., that it could consistently be followed by all agents in relevantly similar situations. In the *Groundwork* he gives the example of promise-keeping. Is it moral to break a promise when it suits me? That is, can I make the principle 'I may always break a promise when it's in my interest to do so' into a universal law? No, Kant argues, because if everyone did so, no one would believe promises people made in the first place, and the whole practice of promising would break down. So Kant provides us with a procedure by which reason can establish whether a principle is moral: and along with this, he gives us a general formula for what it is to be moral: act only on that principle that could be turned into a universal law.

So why, according to Kant, do we see moral demands, the demands of duty, as outweighing other considerations such as personal interest, desire or inclination? And why does he think we have to rigorously exclude all desire and inclination from the realm of the moral? His answer reflects his conception of human nature. As we saw in the previous chapter, Kant is amongst those who take up the Platonic conception of human nature, which tends to identify human beings most closely with their 'higher' rational side, and sees them as engaged in a constant struggle to control their 'lower', desiring side. He shares with Plato and also Christian moral thinking a hostility towards desire. In Kant's version of this picture, our reason constitutes the deepest and most valuable part of us. It is what raises us above nature and makes us unique. Everything else in nature is moved blindly, by mechanical forces. Even animals behave in this mechanical way. Human beings are partly like this, for they have a non-rational, natural side to their make-up, namely their desires, inclinations and emotions. But this is their lower side, which they share with the rest of nature. They are also, and more importantly, rational beings. Only rational beings have the capacity to act consciously in accordance with principles they formulate for themselves. This is something higher, something which sets us apart from the rest of nature.

Given this view of human nature it follows that rational agents ought to determine their actions in this way. As Charles Taylor puts it, 'the fundamental principle underlying Kant's whole ethical theory is something of this form: live up to what you really are - rational agents' (Taylor 1985, 324). To be moved to act by our desires, emotions and inclinations, to become just

another thing conforming to mechanical necessity, is to break faith with our rational nature, to fall below our proper status. It is only when we are behaving rationally, in accordance with moral laws we formulate for ourselves, that we are living up to our true status as rational beings. Moreover the special value of rationality is something we ourselves recognize. We experience our rationality as being something 'higher'. This is why Kant thinks we experience moral commands, the demands of duty, as being more important than other considerations such as personal interest, desire or inclination. At the same time, because we are not purely rational beings, we do not effortlessly do what is rational, what is morally right. We are sometimes swayed by desire and inclination. So being moral is a constant struggle to rise above, suppress and control our desires and inclinations; and this is why, according to Kant, we experience moral laws as duties, as things we recognize that we ought to do even if we don't always manage to do them.

These are the main features, then, of Kant's moral theory. There are two further aspects worth noting. First of all, the idea that rationality is something higher than nature, that it has a special value, gives him another way of characterizing what it is in general to be moral. We have already seen one formulation: act only on that principle that could be turned into a universal law. Kant gives another, this time in terms of how we should treat rational beings. Everything else in nature can be used as instruments for our own goals and projects, but rational agents have their own goals and should be treated with these goals in view. Hence we should always treat rational agents, ourselves and others, never simply as means but always also as ends in themselves. In other words, we should respect them as beings with their own goals, capable of forming goals and acting in accordance with principles they have formulated for themselves. This is Kant's notion of respect for persons, which we looked at in Chapter 2. His moral theory leads us directly to the idea that persons, or rational agents, have a special value and are deserving of moral respect. Thus, to revisit an earlier example, it is because *Sar Trak The Next Generation's* android Data is a rational agent that he should not be treated as a mere means, taken apart in order to be used to further scientific research, but has his own goals and his own preferences in the matter, which ought to be taken into account.

A second feature of the Kantian conception of morality to note is that it is bound up with a powerful notion of freedom. For Kant, being moral certainly involves obeying laws, but these are laws that we as rational beings formulate for ourselves. So when we are being moral we are determining ourselves,

obeying only the dictates of our own rationality. By the same token, we are free from external influences, not only the influences of external nature, including our own desires and inclinations, but also the dictates of external moral authorities, other people, a church or whatever. Morality for Kant is thus bound up with freedom, which he calls 'autonomy', understood as my determining for myself the principles I live by, giving shape and direction to my own existence, rather than being determined by external influences. Equally, if I am subject to external influences, in a state of 'heteronomy' as Kant puts it, I cannot be said to be acting morally. This interlinking of morality and freedom is evident in *A Clockwork Orange*, in which, as we've seen, the film's anti-hero Alex is subjected to aversion therapy to cure him of his violent tendencies. He is thus transformed into a 'good' person, one who is unable to do any wrong without feeling physical distress. But it can be argued that he is not really morally good in this state, that he is not a moral agent at all, because these acts are not the result of self-determination but of the influence of external forces. This indeed is the view of the prison chaplain who complains that the conditioned Alex may have ceased to be a wrongdoer, but he has also ceased to be a 'creature capable of moral choice'.

Kant's vision of morality as arising out of human reason, insofar as rational agents formulate moral rules for themselves, and give shape and direction to their lives, has been immensely influential. However, numerous questions have also been raised about Kant's formulation of this ideal. Some of these questions involve the role of reason in his picture. Doubts have arisen as to whether reason as Kant presents it is capable of generating the moral rules we need. Is the rather abstract process of determining whether a principle can be consistently made a universal law sufficient to establish all moral principles? Moreover, Kant's emphasis on reason means that being moral requires the exclusion of all desire, inclination, emotion and feeling from the scene, so that we can be motivated purely by rational considerations. The result is a rather cold, austere conception of morality, in which we are required to act purely out of a sense of duty, and where feelings like love and compassion have no place. Instead we have to constantly struggle to suppress, control and discipline all feelings and desires, to prevent them from intruding on our moral thinking. As with the Platonic and Christian pictures, we may find this repressive, self-denying conception of the moral life rather unpalatable. Indeed, although Kant is willing to hold that we could be moral beings without any feelings of love and compassion, it might be argued that an absence of love or compassion in our moral behaviour itself amounts to a moral failure.

A further area of concern is Kant's insistence that the consequences of our acts are morally irrelevant. It is certainly possible for actions to be morally praiseworthy if done from good intentions, even if these actions lead to unfortunate results. As noted earlier, Kant's stance in *High Noon* would surely be morally worthy, even if he ended up being killed. To that extent, Kant's view seems plausible. But can we go as far as to say that consequences have no bearing at all, as Kant seems to want to? For example, would it be morally praiseworthy never to break a promise, even if doing so would save thousands of people from a terrible death? There is some question, also, whether Kant himself entirely avoids smuggling in a consideration of consequences into his moral conclusions. After all, when considering the universalizability of a principle like promise-keeping he looks to the consequences of not keeping promises. So perhaps we cannot simply exclude consideration of the consequences of our actions from moral reflection, as Kant suggests. There is however another distinctively modern moral theory in which the consequences of our actions play a central role, utilitarianism, and it is to this that we now turn.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism was first formulated by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) towards the end of the eighteenth century and refined by his successor John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) in the nineteenth century. Like Kantian moral theory, utilitarianism is a modern conception of morality in that it does not rely on God to provide us with moral rules, but grounds morality in human nature. Unlike Kant's theory however, utilitarianism does not view human beings primarily as rational beings, beings who should obey the austere, pleasureless dictates of their rationality. It rejects the whole tradition, going back to Plato, of viewing human nature as a battleground between reason and desire. Its view of human nature is much more in the Humean tradition, in which human beings are primarily motivated by desire and passion, and reason is the servant of the passions. Human beings, for utilitarianism, are primarily creatures that feel, creatures that seek to maximize pleasure and avoid pain. The role of reason is now to calculate what we can do to best bring about pleasure and avoid pain. And morality is now a matter of the consequences of our acts, of doing whatever will maximize the amount of pleasure, of happiness, in the world.

The notion of human beings as primarily creatures that seek pleasure and seek to avoid pain is the starting point for Bentham's pioneering formulation

of utilitarianism, in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Pleasure and pain govern life, Bentham holds, and they point not only to what people in fact do, but also what they ought to do. People in practice always act so as to maximize their pleasure, which Bentham identifies with happiness, and to minimize their pain, their misery or unhappiness. And all we mean by calling an act good or right, Bentham thinks, is that it promotes pleasure. When we say that we ought to do something, we mean that the act in question is useful in bringing about pleasure or happiness. On this basis he formulates the general utilitarian position. The moral character of an act derives from its consequences, from how much pleasure or happiness it produces. We ought to live and act in such a way as to promote the greatest happiness for all those who are in any way affected by the action. An action is right insofar as it tends to create the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

Utilitarianism is certainly a very appealing moral theory. Morality on this view is no less than the attempt to bring as much happiness into the world as possible. This is a morality that seeks to improve the world, to reform our personal and social practices. This makes being moral a very attractive option; and now the question of why we should be moral, why we should do the right thing, can be answered by saying that we should be moral because human beings seek pleasure, they value happiness, and moral acts are those that promote this happiness. Of course, the utilitarian argues that moral acts are those that produce the greatest happiness not just for the individual who acts but for the greatest number, and you might ask why should we seek to produce the greatest happiness for as many people as possible, rather than simply maximize our own individual happiness? In fact, Bentham is not entirely clear on this point. In pursuing our own happiness, he believes, we should seek the general happiness of society as well, but it is not quite clear why. Even if I must always seek to maximize my own happiness, I am surely not obliged to take the happiness of other people into account, except insofar as it serves to increase my happiness; and there are also clearly times when my happiness requires that other people be deprived of theirs. Bentham does not address these considerations.

Nonetheless, it might still be said, who could argue with the general proposition that we should oppose suffering and promote happiness? Well, let us leave this issue aside for the moment and look at some of the other positive features of utilitarianism. One attractive feature is that it appears to make it possible to calculate with certainty what is the right thing to do. For the utilitarian, we are not aiming to produce something other-worldly or

mysterious, but rather an actual effect on the world, concrete differences in people's lives; and these are effects which can be measured in some way. In deciding what to do, we simply have to determine which course of action will produce the greatest amount of happiness for all those affected by the action. An action may have a number of consequences, of course. It may produce both happiness and unhappiness. But for utilitarianism, an action can be good if it produces some unhappiness, as long as, on balance, it produces the most happiness in comparison with other actions. So utilitarianism opens morality up to rational debate and resolution. And not only can we establish the right thing to do once and for all. This also means that there are no longer any moral dilemmas, at least in principle. Take for example the terrible dilemma faced by concentration-camp survivor Sophie (Meryl Streep) in *Sophie's Choice* (Alan Pakula, 1982), where she is forced by the Nazis to choose which of her two children is to live and which is to die. For utilitarianism, there is no fundamental problem here. This is in essence a matter of calculation, of working out how much happiness and unhappiness each alternative will produce, and choosing the one that produces the most overall happiness.

However, this process of calculation is not as straightforward as it might sound. To begin with, there can be practical difficulties in calculating the consequences of our actions, in determining how much overall happiness they are going to produce. Clearly, it would be very difficult in practice to establish which choice is going to produce the most overall happiness in the above example. To take another wartime example, in *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) leads a squad of soldiers into Normandy after D-Day to bring home a soldier whose brothers have all been killed. As they proceed the soldiers find themselves resenting having to risk their lives for someone they do not know, and who surely has no more right to live than they do. At one point Miller wonders what it would take to make the mission worthwhile: 'This Ryan had better be worth it. He'd better go home and cure some disease or invent a longer-lasting light bulb or something.' The thinking here is entirely utilitarian. If Ryan ends up doing something wonderful for humanity, then despite all the risks and suffering involved in the mission, saving him will be justified because it will produce more overall happiness than not saving him. So if Ryan produces sufficient happiness on his return we will be able to say that the mission was the right thing to do. But once again there are practical difficulties in making this kind of calculation. How do we measure the overall effect Ryan will have on the world? Also, how far into the future do we measure? Do we take into account

the effects he will have on those who are alive now, or on future generations as well?

Apart from practical difficulties in calculating the consequences of actions, there is also the question of how we are to measure the happiness that results. In order to determine that one course of action is preferable to another, we need to be able to compare happinesses, to say that one act produces more overall pleasure or happiness than another. However, happiness takes many forms, and if very different kinds of happiness are produced, it is not clear how we are to compare them. For example, suppose saving one soldier will result in his mother feeling profound happiness at his safe return, while saving another will result in a widespread, though rather pedestrian, happiness, when he goes on to invent a longer-lasting light bulb. Can we say that one action produces greater or less happiness than the other? In fact they seem to be qualitatively different kinds of happiness, so different in character that they cannot really be compared. Bentham himself thought that pleasures differed only in quantity, and that by using various scales - intensity, duration, likelihood of recurrence, etc. - it would be possible to measure the overall amount of pleasure in each instance. But it is not clear that we could ever arrive at precise figures for these measurements. Overall, Bentham's proposal looks rather implausible.

A second set of problems for the utilitarian picture has to do with the identification of happiness with pleasure. Early on, critics of utilitarianism seized on Bentham's claim that all things being equal, pushpin (a party game) is as good as poetry. For Bentham, happiness is to be understood in terms of pleasure, and pleasures differ only in quantity, so if different activities produce the same amount of pleasure there is nothing to distinguish one as better than the other. But critics labelled utilitarianism a 'pig philosophy' as a result. Surely, it was argued, pleasures like those associated with poetry were 'higher' or more refined than others, such as the pleasures of party games. In his book *Utilitarianism*, Bentham's successor John Stuart Mill sought to refine the utilitarian position by arguing that for human beings there were indeed 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures, and that we should aim to maximize the higher ones. As Mill famously put it, 'better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied' (Mill 1987, 281). The higher pleasures here are intellectual or spiritual pleasures like literary or artistic enjoyment, and the lower pleasures are physical pleasures, the carnal and corporeal pleasures that the lower orders so delighted in. Mill is not simply saying that we ought to cultivate these higher pleasures; he thinks we will not be truly satisfied, fully happy, if we do not. Of course

some might respond that they are perfectly happy pursuing trivial physical pleasures, and that Mill's talk of higher pleasures reflects intellectual snobbery or class prejudice. Mill's answer is that the higher pleasures can be said to be superior because human beings really prefer them, if people are faced with a choice between higher and lower pleasures, having properly experienced both, they will always opt for the higher ones.

The idea that some pleasures are higher than others, and that we tend to prefer the higher to the lower, is taken up in a number of films. In *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964), based on George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, the working-class flower-seller (Audrey Hepburn) is introduced to the higher pleasures of Professor Higgins and his circle. Having experienced the higher pleasures of elevated society, she finds she can no longer go back to her old working-class life, where only the lower pleasures are possible. Similarly, in another *Pygmalion* story, *Educating Rita* (Lewis Gilbert, 1983), a working-class hairdresser (Julie Walters) who tries to better herself by studying at university finds that she now prefers the higher pleasures of literature and can no longer be content with the simple pleasures she once enjoyed (singing in the pub and so on). However, what is Mill to say to someone who, having tasted the higher pleasures, turns their back on them? In *Dangerous Liaisons* (Stephen Frears, 1988), a professional philanderer (John Malkovich) and a sadistic aristocrat (Glenn Close) take this path, deriving their pleasures from ruining the lives of innocents through sexual deceit and betrayal. And if people do indeed prefer the lower pleasures to the higher, what right, it might be argued, has anyone to label these pleasures inferior? Mill acknowledges that some who have been able to appreciate the higher pleasures subsequently turn back to the lower, but he thinks that these are cases of degeneration, explainable in social and psychological terms. At this point however, Mill is in danger of abandoning the very criterion of personal preference he earlier relied on, and thus leaving himself open once again to the accusation of intellectual or class snobbery.

A further problem that arises with utilitarianism is that all kinds of questionable acts, including gross injustice and premeditated murder, appear to be justifiable on utilitarian grounds, given the right circumstances. A number of films provide illustrations of this. In *Breaker Morant* (Bruce Beresford, 1980) an unjust court-martial is allowed to go ahead, and three Australian soldiers are sacrificed, in order to serve the greater good by preventing the Germans from entering the Boer war. In *The Last Supper* (Stacey Title, 1996), a group of liberal American students decide to do away with obnoxious

right-wing types by inviting them over to dinner and poisoning them. They justify their actions on the utilitarian grounds that these people cause all kinds of misery, and their murder will make the world a happier place. As one of the characters, Marc (Jonathan Penner), puts it, wouldn't anyone murder Hitler in cold blood if they were able to return to a time before he rose to power, knowing all that he was going to do? Similar thinking can be used to justify some very harsh social policies. The brainwashing of prisoners like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* is justified by the government on the utilitarian grounds that it will reduce crime and relieve the overcrowding in prison. Harrison Bergeron (Bruce Pittman, 1995) depicts another future society, one which holds televised public executions on the grounds that this serves as a deterrent. While this may seem extreme, it is a standard utilitarian argument for capital punishment that it has a deterrent effect on serious crime, and distress to the executed criminal being outweighed by the benefits to the general public; and televising executions is quite consistent with such a viewpoint.

So utilitarianism has a disturbing capacity to justify all kinds of questionable acts, because of their good consequences. In response, one might want to argue that certain acts are simply unacceptable, and should never be permitted, no matter how beneficial the consequences might be. This is in fact the Kantian position. Although, as we saw, the Kantian position itself seems problematic to the extent that it excludes all consideration of consequences from moral consideration, it does provide an alternative to the utilitarian perspective for which anything is justifiable if it has good consequences. The conflict between the two perspectives in this regard is evident for example in the mock-philosophical discussion in *Love and Death*, where Boris and Sonia, now married, consider whether to go to Moscow to kill Napoleon. If we don't kill Napoleon, says Boris, he will lay waste to all of Europe; but this utilitarian argument is immediately countered with a Kantian one, as Boris wonders if murder doesn't carry with it what he calls a 'moral imperative', i.e., whether there is something inherently wrong with killing someone, whatever good might come of it. Similarly, in *Quiz Show* (Robert Redford, 1994), the producers of a fifties American television quiz show try to convince academic Charles Van Doren (Ralph Fiennes) to accept having the answer beforehand, because if he does well on the show he will promote education (they tell him he will be an 'intellectual Joe DiMaggio'); but Van Doren's reply, 'I'm just trying to imagine what Kant would make of that', implies he is aware that a different moral perspective on the situation is possible, that

cheating is intrinsically bad, whatever the consequences. For the moment at least, he rejects their offer.

Existentialism: absurdity, freedom and bad faith

Although we can point to problems with both the Kantian and utilitarian approaches, these accounts remain the two most significant and influential modern moral theories. Utilitarianism in particular has proved surprisingly resilient. Numerous arguments have been raised against it, but it has been modified rather than abandoned. There is one further account of morality we can consider here, an account very much of the twentieth century - existentialism. While there are significant precursors in Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), existentialism proper flourished in the 1940s and 1950s. It is linked in particular with a number of French thinkers who became well known after the Second World War: Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Albert Camus (1913-1960). Of these perhaps Sartre is the most representative. His book *Being and Nothingness* contains the definitive formulation of existentialism, and the account of existentialism given here will be largely his.

Existentialism is distinctive in holding that there is either nothing outside of or within ourselves that we can appeal to in order to justify our values and moral rules. There is no God to give us guidance as to how to live; reason is unable to provide us with rules for living, as Kant thought; and nor can we appeal to human happiness as our goal, in the utilitarian spirit. Existentialism shares with Kantianism and utilitarianism the view that human beings are the basis of morality; but for existentialism, if there are moral rules or values of any sort, it is because we have freely chosen them, and nothing can guide us in these choices. It is entirely up to us to give our existence its values and goals. Thus from the existentialist perspective, Kane's decision in *High Noon* to stay in town and face the returning outlaw is a free choice which cannot be justified in any way whatsoever. Rick's choice in *Casablanca* to sacrifice Ilsa for the sake of a better future for humanity, Terry's decision to take a stand against the corrupt waterfront union boss in *On the Waterfront*, Montag's decision to rebel against the state in *Fahrenheit 451*, Schindler's decision to help the Jews in *Schindler's List* - all these are free choices, for which they must bear full responsibility. So why on this view should we be moral, rather than non-moral, self-sacrificing rather than opportunistic, rebellious rather than complicit? There is no answer to that. It is up to us to choose which way to

go, and whatever we choose is ultimately without support or justification. To explore existentialism further, it is helpful to look at a number of the specific themes it explores: absurdity, the death of God, freedom, authenticity and bad faith.

For existentialism, the world is 'absurd'. That is, there is no reason for the way the world is, for what happens in it, and human beings in particular have no reason or justification for existing. Life is essentially meaningless, and the only thing that awaits us is death. This feeling of absurdity arises partly because for the existentialists, 'God is dead'. This slogan, first articulated by Nietzsche (see Nietzsche 1974, 181-2), refers to the gradual erosion of religious belief that has taken place over the last three hundred years. As a result, the existentialists argue, there is no longer any God-given order or grand plan which we can appeal to in order to give point and purpose to our existence; and this means that the world is a bleak, meaningless place. For some, we need religion precisely to keep such meaninglessness at bay. This is the position of the rabbi in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, that we must believe in a God-given moral structure or there is no point in going on; and also of the main character in *The Baptism*, whose turn to religion allows her to escape from an empty life, and to believe that even the murder of her husband is somehow meaningful, part of some larger plan. But for existentialism, recourse to God is no longer an option. To resort to belief in God is, as Camus puts it in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, to commit 'philosophical suicide' - to try to evade absurdity at the cost of denying thought and sacrificing our critical faculties.

Moreover, the existentialists no longer believe that we can replace God with human nature as the reference point; they reject the idea that either reason or happiness can provide our lives with guidance or purpose. They no longer agree with Kant that reason can establish values or goals for us. For them, his attempts to found morality on some purely rational procedure only mean that his thinking has become lost in an ethereal world of philosophical abstraction. But what about the more down-to-earth notion of human happiness, and the utilitarian ideal of working for the common good? The individual's capacity to contribute to the happiness of others is sometimes put forward as a reason for thinking that life is meaningful. This is the view for example in *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946). George Bailey (James Stewart), the director of a small town savings and loans association on the verge of bankruptcy, thinks that he is a failure and is on the verge of suicide. An angel (Henry Travers) convinces him that his life is worth living by showing him how much worse things would have been if he hadn't existed.

By living he has brought much happiness to those around him, to his family, friends and those he has helped through his savings and loans association. But the existentialists reject the very idea that happiness, for oneself or for those around one, is a worthy goal. They tend to identify happiness with unthinking contentment, a state which like religious belief can only be achieved through philosophical suicide, the sacrifice of one's critical faculties. As long as we are more than unconscious brutes, we can never be truly content. We could only become happy by ceasing to be human.

This existentialist sense of the meaninglessness of life was undoubtedly intensified by the horrors of the Second World War, and a sense that the traditional and familiar moral and social values had collapsed. As Max Charlesworth puts it, 'Post-war European man found himself in a desolate and featureless landscape without any signs to guide him, without any hope that he could by his efforts bring about a better world' (Charlesworth 1974, 2). Hence the appeal of existentialism in the forties and fifties. This disenchantment with traditional values and the sense of the absurdity of existence was also fed by the ensuing Cold War and its threat of a nuclear catastrophe that could wipe out all human achievements in an instant. A number of films of the period reflect this concern, notably *On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer, 1959), which portrays the last people left alive after the third world war. They have taken refuge in Australia and as they await their death from the radioactive clouds spreading around the globe, they try to cope with their seemingly pointless existence in various ways. Some turn to religion, to philosophical suicide; others, to the real thing. Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) also takes up this theme, dealing with it in the form of a historical allegory. In fourteenth-century Sweden, the knight Antonius Block (Max von Sydow) and his squire return from the Crusades to find the Black Death rife in the land. Faced with the threat of mass death, people are questioning all moral and religious values. God himself seems to have abandoned humanity, and the dominant question raised by the film's characters is whether life has any meaning at all. At the time the film was being made, Bergman indicated that for him the atom bomb corresponded to a modern plague (see Cowie 1982, 141).

For philosophical and historical reasons, then, the existentialists argue that the world is absurd, that there are no pre-existing standards or values human beings can appeal to in order to justify their existence or actions. The other side of this, however, is that human beings are free to give their lives whatever goal or purpose they choose, if God does not exist and all prevailing values

are in question, then everything is indeed permitted. Indeed, human freedom is the most central theme of the existentialist account. For the existentialists, human beings are above all free subjects; our freedom is what sets us apart from everything else in nature, and makes us disjunctively human. This is freedom understood as a capacity for self-determination, independently of all external forces. It is a version of the Kantian notion of autonomy, only without Kant's faith that reason will provide us with guidance as to how to act. Without any guidance whatsoever we freely choose our values and goals, and in doing so give our existence meaning and purpose. To try to evade our responsibility, to pretend that our goals and values are in some way imposed on us, is the great existentialist sin: it is what Sartre calls 'bad faith', the cowardly evasion of our freedom. Of course, it is certainly attractive to try to evade acknowledgement of our freedom. To be wholly responsible for all our values is a terrible burden, which we experience, according to Sartre, as 'anguish'. That is, I experience a fundamental anxiety before the necessity of having to choose, to be totally responsible for my existence. By denying my freedom I can find contentment and happiness. Nonetheless, to take refuge in the belief that my values and goals are simply imposed on me by God, the society or nature, and that I have no choice but to do what I do, is to deny the very freedom that makes us human. It is to be 'inauthentic'.

Out of this is born the image of the existential hero, who heroically refuses to rely on external props, to appeal to pre-existing values and standards, but instead shoulders the heavy burden of responsibility for their existence. Carnus summed it up in his image of the Greek hero Sisyphus, condemned by the Gods to endlessly roll a stone up a hill only to have it roll down again - a pointless, absurd task that he nonetheless embraces defiantly, even joyfully (see Carnus 1975, 109-11). In the American cinema of the fifties and sixties, the existential rebel was linked with alienated youth, and incorporated into the growing countercultural movement. A number of films of the period focus on what we might call instinctively rebellious individuals, unable to accept the stifling values of middle-class society and striking out on a path of their own. The classic figure here is Marlon Brando's Johnny in *The Wild One* (Laslo Benedek, 1954), leader of the bikers' gang who invade a small town. His protest is summed up in the famous exchange with the girl he's dancing with in the bar: 'What are you rebelling against, Johnny?' Johnny: 'What've you got?' Closely following in Johnny's footsteps is James Dean's troubled youth in *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), alienated from the world and the values of the adults around him; Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda on

the road in *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), rejecting not only conventional values but also those of the sixties counterculture; and Jack Nicholson's Bobby Dupea, on the run from both his upper-middle-class musical career and his alternative working-class life as an oil rigger in *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Fosse, 1970). These are all heroic figures to the extent that they refuse to fall into unthinking conformity with conventional values and the expectations of those around them, who strike out on their own path, even though this means being unhappy, troubled and lost.

No doubt these films provide a fairly romantic view of the existential rebel. The individual alienated from conventional social values and adrift without a reference point can be a much less appealing figure, as for example in Wim Wenders' film of existential alienation *The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty* (1971). Here, goalkeeper Joseph Bloch (Arthur Brauss) walks out of a football game, wanders aimlessly through the city, and arbitrarily commits a murder. He does not seem to have any real idea where he is going or why he acts, and the film reinforces this by refusing to offer any kind of explanation for his actions. He comes across not as a heroic figure but as a disturbed loner. Still, alienation is only part of the existentialist story. For the existentialists, we may no longer be able to appeal to conventional or God-given values, but this also means that we ourselves take centre stage in giving our lives meaning and value. This is the individual's defiant self-affirmation in the face of an absurd world celebrated by Carnus in his image of Sisyphus. A film closer to this spirit is Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). Here Hannah's ex-husband Mickey (Allen) suffers a cancer scare and starts wondering if life has any point, since we are all destined to die. He finds that he is unable to take refuge in religion, to commit philosophical suicide, and is close to actual suicide when he comes to the realization that even if there is no God, and death turns out to be the end, he should stop worrying and enjoy life while it lasts. In best Sisyphusian fashion, the recognition of life's absurdity is combined here with a defiant decision to embrace it and go on regardless.

The opposite of the existential hero is the person who tries to avoid confronting the absurdity of existence, to hide from the burden of taking responsibility for their life through philosophical suicide or bad faith. We are in bad faith, for example, if we believe there is a God or a human nature that provides us with an ultimate purpose or direction, that we had no choice but to 'follow orders', that our actions are determined by social conditioning, unconscious drives or physical causes. These are all ways in which we pretend to ourselves that we are not free, and thus try to evade responsibility for what

we do. Thus in *Quiz Show*, even when Van Doren is confessing to his father that he cheated on the television quiz show, he offers self-justifying accounts of his actions ('what was I supposed to do, disillusion the whole country?'). As his father points out, he makes it sound as if he had no choice in the matter. Similarly, to claim as Peter Lorre's child-killer does in *M* that he 'cannot help what he does', is, for the existentialists, to take refuge in self-deception. Even that most driven of characters, the cinematic vampire, is susceptible these days to existentialist criticism. In *Interview with a Vampire* (Neil Jordan, 1994), the vampire Louis (Brad Pitt) refuses to accept that he is destined to be evil. Though his mentor Lestat (Tom Cruise) tells him that it is now his nature to kill, he struggles to find a different purpose for his existence. Compare this with *The Addiction* (Abel Ferrara, 1995), where Kathleen (Lili Taylor), an idealistic philosophy student appalled by a world that could allow evils like the Holocaust, is turned into a vampire and becomes everything she hates. There are copious references to Sartre and other existentialists (her thesis is on existentialist philosophy), but the film puts forward the entirely unexistentialist view that in the end Kathleen has no choice but to accept her fate, and indeed that all human beings have an innate predisposition towards evil.

Self-deception is a common enough tendency in human life, but we may want to question the existentialist tendency to see it primarily in terms of an attempt to avoid the burden of our freedom. Often, what seems to motivate the misrepresentation of events to ourselves is that we are trying to preserve a certain conception of who we are, a certain self-image. To return to Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, which we looked at in Chapter 1, as the story is retold from a number of different perspectives, it becomes clear that the events are being presented in such a way that whoever is telling the story appears in the best possible light. This kind of self-deception is also evident in *Judgment at Nuremberg* (Stanley Kramer, 1961), where Ernst Janning (Burt Lancaster), a senior German judge on trial at Nuremberg after the war, deludes himself that he only went along with the Third Reich to lessen its harshness, to prevent a worse man taking his place. And in *Mephisto* (Istvan Szabo, 1981) the actor Hendrik Hofgen (Klaus Maria Brandauer) who sells his soul to the Nazis in exchange for fame and fortune imagines that he is exploiting them in order to further his art, but in the end it becomes clear that he has deeply deceived himself, that he was never anything more than a tool of the Nazi regime, caught like a fly in its web. It is not entirely clear how these cases of self-deception can be incorporated into the existentialist model of denial of freedom and responsibility.

But perhaps a more significant problem that arises with the existentialist account concerns its notion of freedom itself. It has been argued by many that in its stress on human freedom as absolute, existentialists like Sartre fail to properly take into account the influence of our situation or circumstances, not only our physical being but also social and historical context. Not that existentialism simply ignores our situation, Sartre in particular argues that we always exist in a specific situation, with a certain past, in certain social and historical circumstances. Indeed, he argues, we can only be free in a specific situation, that being in a situation is a necessary condition for freedom. But he also wants to say that this situatedness does not limit my freedom in any way, that I remain absolutely free. My freedom manifests itself in my capacity to choose goals or possibilities that go beyond my present situation, and nothing in my situation can determine what possibilities I choose. For example, my situation does not compel me in any way to join a revolution; I choose revolution, and it is in fact only in the light of my free choice that my situation appears to me as 'intolerable'. So understood, my factual situation is indeed a necessary condition for my freedom, but only in the sense that I require it in order to be able to look beyond it, to envisage alternatives to it.

Nonetheless, we may still wonder whether Sartre has not underestimated the force of circumstances, the influence of our social and historical situation on how we choose. We may wonder whether freedom can be understood purely in terms of a rejection, a revolt against one's circumstances and past. The existentialist belief that we can escape radically from our circumstances in this way is called into question in *Breathless* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1959). Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo), a petty criminal, guns down a policeman and hides out in the Paris apartment of a young American student Patricia (Jean Seberg), who eventually betrays him to the police. Along the way, Michel sees himself very much as the existential hero. He seems to be an anarchic free spirit, the master of his own fate, and the film itself has an unconventional, improvisational look that seems to reflect this freedom. But as David Sterritt points out (1999, 56–60), it gradually becomes clear that Michel is considerably influenced by his culture. Many of his rather theatrical mannerisms and gestures are in fact borrowed from the movies (especially Bogart movies). Michel and Patricia certainly make choices, but these choices are very much limited by their social situation and the options that it makes available. In the end, they both play out roles that existed long before they came on the scene – killer, lover, and in the end, squalier.

More recently, the idea of freedom as repudiation of one's past and

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circumstances in order to make oneself anew has been questioned in *Three Colours: Blue* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1993), the first of Kieslowski's 'three colours' series. After the death of her husband and daughter in a car crash, Julie (Juliette Binoche) tries to leave behind all vestiges of her former existence, to withdraw from the world, in order to live a completely autonomous life. She burns her composer husband's compositions, puts her mother in a home, and moves into a Paris apartment where no one knows her. As she tells her mother, 'I want no belongings, no memories, no friends, no love.' It is the perfect recipe for the existentialist rebel, who heroically distances himself from conventional expectations and rejects all familiar reference points. But Julie finds that in practice she cannot escape from her past or from human relationships and commitments, and that she is unable to live without belief or hope. Bit by bit she becomes involved in the life of her neighbours, people from her past track her down, and she is eventually moved to provide a home for her husband's mistress, pregnant with his child. Gradually she is drawn back into the stream of life. Radical freedom and independence turn out to be an impossible dream.

Sartre himself, in his later writings, came to question the core existentialist notion of the radically free individual, capable of standing apart from all external circumstances and choosing itself in complete freedom, that he had formerly championed. He came to pay more attention to the situation we find ourselves in. Without abandoning his commitment to freedom, he came to argue for an account which acknowledges that human beings are profoundly influenced and constrained by their social, political and historical circumstances. His thinking thus began to turn in the direction of social and political philosophy. In this chapter, we have focused on moral philosophy, on why individuals should be moral and what being moral might involve. It is now time for this discussion also to move on to wider social and political concerns, to social and political philosophy; and this will be the topic of the next chapter.

4

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Antz.
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