



**'Bridging the Gap'**

**IB PHILOSOPHY**



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## Preparation for Sixth Form Philosophy

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## General introduction

*"Nobody asked me if I wanted to join the human race. Now I'm in it, a lot of people are keen to tell me who I am and how to live the life I've got. They can't all be right. Can philosophy help at all? "*

Of course, the answer to this is 'perhaps'. In this the Core Theme we'll be looking at the question of what it means to be human. The idea is that by examining this question from various different perspectives, we will arrive at a deeper understanding of ourselves as individuals and human beings as a whole. This understanding might help us lead a more satisfying and meaningful life. That's the hope, anyway.

We'll start by looking at 'Your Life' which roughly equates to what is known as the 'Human Condition': how and why we live out our lives given the state of the world as we see it. After that we'll turn to 'You' as a 'Person': what might be essential to your being and how it distinguishes you from other beings.





## The Human Condition

### Human Nature

It won't surprise you to know that different philosophers have come up with different ideas about what the nature of human beings consists in. Depending on what this 'nature' turns out to be will, of course, influence the way that we might aim to live out our lives in the world.

What we'll do is have a quick outline of a few different interpretations of human nature just to give us the insight into just how controversial (and crucial) the whole question is to Philosophy. After that, we can turn to some more detailed analysis to see how five different accounts of human nature lead to quite different formulae for living a life. These five are: rational; theistic (specifically Christian); existential; naturalistic; Confucian.

### Some outline

#### Our Nature is Reason

Plato (427 - 347BC) argued that the systematic use of our reasoning powers will show us the best way to live: our nature is essentially rational. At first glance, his metaphysical position looks rather odd. He speaks of a God (or gods) but it is clear that this is a much more abstract sort of thing than usual. And the 'real world' is not physical at all.



What he identifies his God with is reason in the universe

- when we apprehend things through our reason, when we use our reason, we are at one with the rest of reason. This human capacity for reason separates us from the rest of the world. In fact, our reason puts us in touch with a world which Plato thought of as having greater reality than this merely physical world. He argued that we know certain things that can never have got into our minds from our experience (i.e. empirically). We all know that a straight line has length but no width. We can build on this knowledge to know things about flat or solid bodies in geometry, for instance. But, given that we have never - can never - actually encountered a widthless straight line, where has this knowledge come from? His answer is simple but profoundly affects our worldview. He says that we must be born with this knowledge - our soul (which existed previous to us) knows such truths. The trauma of birth as a physical being makes us forget such truths which our soul knows. However, reasoning carefully helps us rediscover the true way of apprehending things
- and ultimately gives us the godlike view of the world as it really is: everything becomes one with reason.

If we accept this line of thinking, we might then follow Plato's recommendation to philosophise (using our reason, of course) and, if we aren't equipped to think at this rarefied level, to submit to those Philosopher-kings who can (as set out in his Utopian book, *The Republic*).

For Plato then, the human condition is marked by ignorance which, in Philosophers at least, can be overcome by rational pursuit of truth through reason (empirical 'knowledge' doesn't count as knowledge and it is futile to pursue it). He thought that it was also possible to discover moral truths - there are ethical forms which lie behind the virtues that we commend: we can reason our way into the knowledge of what is good.

Plato is a dualist in that he stood for the idea that humans are a composite of a physical body allied to a non-physical soul (or mind). This soul is eternal: it existed before birth and will continue to exist after



death. A pressing question he has to address is that, given this soul and its divine ability to reason, why do humans do such base and irrational things during their lives?

His answer initially is to note that there are three parts to the soul: reason (which he associated with the head); spirit - emotions like courage and pride (which he associated with the heart); and desire - our baser appetites like lust and greed (which he associated with the loins). This analysis stems from his knowledge of how we are: we do often seem to experience an internal conflict between different desires (e.g. I want to indulge in lustful thoughts but am not proud of this indulgence and see it as



not being reasonable in the long run.) His famous image of our tripartite nature is of our soul as a chariot. The chariot is pulled by a white horse (spirit) and a dark horse (desire) and driven by a charioteer (reason). In the best life, the charioteer curbs the excesses of the horses and guides the chariot smoothly and successfully to its destination. Notice that both desire and spirit have a role to play (the chariot can't move without them) but that harmony between the three is maintained by submission to reason. What makes charioteering harmoniously through life hard (and why so

many of us do base and irrational things) is that society is poorly structured (and hence his prescription for Utopia).

Plato also noted that humans *are* social creatures and reason dictates cooperation and a division of workload to match different abilities. He also argued that women and men were essentially equally capable, differing only in biology. He did have a patronising view of women as generally inferior to men; nonetheless, he did recognise that women with the necessary talent could match men.

To summarise: we are born with the divine capacity for reasoning to the truth about the reality of abstract knowledge but being human also involves emotions and appetites which are natural but need to be controlled. We are born with a particular ability and, in the best-ordered, rational and just society, will take up our place within it such that this ability is appropriately used. Though this orderly society needs to be imposed on the majority (who lack philosophical ability), they can trust the authorities to do what is best - i.e. what is reasonable.

Kant was another philosopher committed to putting reason at the centre of human nature. We will consider his account in some detail later.

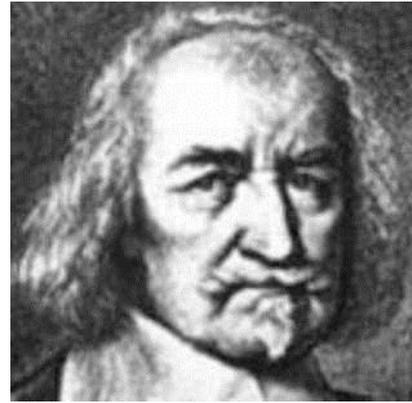
### Our Nature as Egoistical

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was a political philosopher who, in his book *Leviathan* (published in 1651), sought to justify the right of kings to rule. Near the beginning of the book he asks what things would be like if we lived without a state, without all the customs, laws, institutions of regulated society. This leads him to an analysis of human nature - one which paints us in rather unflattering colours. Basically, our nature is to think only of ourselves: we are egoists.

The key ideas which underpin his analysis of human nature are: a) the fact that we have self-knowledge and hence know our own thoughts, desires and fears; b) the laws of motion. The latter needs some explanation.



Hobbes saw humans as physical objects and, as such, subject to natural laws. As Galileo had discovered, physical objects are naturally in motion with forces changing this motion in one way or another. For Hobbes, this all fits in with what might be referred to as our motivation - we are constantly questing beings. He said that what we are forever questing is 'felicity' by which he meant success in gaining what it is that we desire. To acquire felicity it is necessary that we have power. For Hobbes, this is the 'present means to achieve some future apparent Good'. Naturally, the greater one's power (economic, educational, one's network of friends, for example) the greater the chance of felicity. (Note that the possession of power is also a power - which is why power is pursued even when it does not lead to immediate felicity.) Hence, it is our nature to continually quest for greater power.



Now, given that we are all questing for power as a means toward felicity, and given that the things we desire (what we might call resources) are limited, then inevitably individuals will come into conflict. But why should this conflict lead to what he described as a state of war? Here, Hobbes appeals to the idea that humans are equal in that each of us has sufficient strength and skill to kill another human being. The realisation from this is that each of us *can be killed* by another human being. So, in the conflict that naturally arises from our quest for felicity, we know that we might get killed if we thwart the ambitions of a competitor. In short, we reach Hobbes' conclusion that the state of nature is a state of war.

An objector might say that this is far too negative. After all, we are moral beings and so would not have to be in this constant state of fear for our lives. Hobbes disagrees. He says that the notions of right and wrong stem from justice. Justice, he goes on, depends on there being laws which some law-giver has provided. With no law-giver (no state) there can be no justice - and no injustice. In this situation each person has 'the Liberty.. .to use his own power.. .for the preservation of his own Nature; that is to say of his own Life; and consequently, of doing anything which his Judgement, and Reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest thereunto'. In such a condition 'every man has a Right to every thing, even to one another's body'. Thus, in a state of nature one has the liberty to act to preserve one's 'right of nature'.

In addition to this Natural Right of Liberty, he also argues that there are 'Laws of Nature' which also exist. He spells out 19 of these but derives all of them from the first and fundamental law which is a negative version of the golden rule: don't do to others what you wouldn't like them to do to you. This seems like a moral code but Hobbes insists that it is not. He says it derives from reason - the reasoning that following the rule is an individual's best chance of preserving their life.

This produces an apparent inconsistency. Hobbes says that it is rational to seek peace (following his fundamental 'Law of Nature') but also rational to attack other individuals for resources (following his Natural Right of Liberty). How can he have it both ways? The answer to this is to recognise that there are two sorts of rationality: individual and collective. A simple illustration of this is to think of a group of 10 people each of whom grazes their two cows on a piece of common land. Of course, the rational thing for each and every one of them to do individually is to double their number of cows - yes, it is a bit more work in terms of milking and so on, but it doubles the amount of milk available for sale, doubling income. However, if *all* the people did this, the common land would get overgrazed and be unfit for any cows to graze at all. Hence, it is rational individually to double one's number of cows, but irrational when considered collectively.

Thus, we could avoid the state of war in the state of nature if we could ascend to the level of collective rationality and obey the Laws of Nature which tell us to live in peace, without fear. However, we have no duty to obey the Laws of Nature unless others are also obeying them. And since our mutual suspicion and fear of others is high (especially so in a state of nature), then the Laws of Nature never really come into play.



The way out of this predicament is, for Hobbes, the creation of a sovereign who will severely punish anyone transgressing the Laws of Nature. Once such a sovereign is in place, we can all be secure in following these Laws. Of course, this assumes that the sovereign will punish transgressors in accordance with Hobbes' wishes rather than their own; and that there is no possible alternative to an all-powerful sovereign to administer justice. Hobbes seems to rule out altruism, compassion, sympathy, empathy, selflessness as either impossible or unrealistic. To others (including other philosophers) this is unrealistic itself - and they feel there is evidence to show it.

### Our Nature as Noble

Rousseau (1712 - 78) thought Hobbes was wrong about human nature. He agreed that the primary motivation for human beings is self-preservation but added that this was not everything about being human. Rousseau observed that human motivation is also marked by compassion, that we have 'an innate repugnance at seeing a fellow-creature suffer'

(*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*). He added that this is so natural that even some other animals also give proofs of it.

It is this compassion which acts as a restraint against warring with others.

We might well ask that, given this nobler nature, how Rousseau can account for the brutality and suffering that humans dish out to each other. His reply would be to point out that such things stem from how we are conditioned by our society. Far from 'civilised society' being a good thing for humanity, it institutionalises inequality and injustice. As evidence, he pointed out that the lives of so-called 'primitive' people such as the Native American Indians were marked by strong family and group bonds, a harmonious balance between the group and natural resources, respect, good health, lack of crime and vice, and so on. This peaceful and pleasant life gets corrupted by political philosophies which take us further from this natural state.

This notion of living more 'in harmony with nature' being one which best suits us and which would be the ideal human condition is still with us in various 'New Age' groups which try to make as little impact on the rest of Nature as possible. One major objection to this way of thinking is that it ignores (and usually seeks to suppress) another human drive: self-improvement. This would not just be individual selfimprovement but also the improvement of humanity as a whole by producing innovations. It may be wholly natural for us to attempt to shape the world to our own ends.

As well as Rousseau, David Hume objected to Hobbes' analysis. In his essay '*Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature*' he first of all pointed out the consequences of such a view which the egoist might not enjoy. If it is the case that we value other people only with regard to a selfish pleasure, then this must also apply to others: it cannot be the case that they like us because we are nice etc., but only because they derive selfish pleasure from knowing us. He then moves on to other objections:

*In my opinion, there are two things which have led astray those philosophers that have insisted so much on the selfishness of man. In the first place, they found that every act of virtue or friendship was attended with a secret pleasure; whence they concluded, that friendship and virtue could not be disinterested. But the fallacy of this is obvious. The virtuous sentiment or passion produces the pleasure, and does not arise from it. I feel a pleasure in doing good to my friend, because I love him; but do not love him for the sake of that pleasure.*

*In the second place, it has always been found, that the virtuous are far from being indifferent to praise; and therefore they have been represented as a set of vainglorious men, who had nothing in view but the applauses of others. But this is also a fallacy. It is very unjust in the world, when they find any tincture of vanity in a laudable action, to depreciate it upon that account, or ascribe it entirely to that motive. The case is not the same with vanity, as with other passions. Where avarice or revenge enters into any*





*seemingly virtuous action, it is difficult for us to determine how far it enters, and it is natural to suppose it the sole actuating principle. But vanity is so closely allied to virtue, and to love the fame of laudable actions approaches so near the love of laudable actions for their own sake, that these passions are more capable of mixture, than any other kinds of affection; and it is almost impossible to have the latter without some degree of the former... To love the glory of virtuous deeds is a sure proof of the love of virtue.*

Having looked at three interpretations of our nature in outline, we'll now consider five in more detail: Kant and the nature of human reasoning; Christianity and the inclusion of the divine in our nature; Existentialism which claims we have no nature;

Naturalism which accounts for our nature as consistent with natural laws; Confucianism which advocates obedience and reflection in transcending our nature.

### A Kantian Life

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), in reacting against what he saw as the limitations of the two great philosophical systems of rationalism and empiricism, introduced a revolutionary - and great - system of his own. It is called **transcendental idealism** and it provides a framework for explaining the human condition in terms of our nature.



Kant's philosophy aimed at relating human nature to physical nature. This would then allow a reconciliation between the distinctly human qualities of morality and religious faith and the scientific knowledge of the way the world is. To appreciate the implications of this relationship, we need to know a little about Kant's analysis of mind and how we come to gain knowledge.

He pointed out that the mind gains knowledge from two fundamental sources. The first source is the mind's capacity to receive impressions or representations, i.e. our perceptions caused by objects outside the mind. The second source comes from the mind's acting on these perceptions, organising them under concepts, or categories. This activity requires judgements to be made. Kant said that both sources were crucial:

*"To neither of these powers may a preference be given over the other. Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."* (Critique of Pure Reason)

For Kant, 'understanding', the power of conceptual thought, is a species of reason.

But he also has a higher role for reason. We do not simply make individual judgements about the perceptions we get, what we try to do is integrate these judgements into a unified whole: we are not satisfied with *what* something is, we want to know *why* it is. We want explanations that bring our knowledge under general principles - not just for physical nature (as in science), but in human nature too.

This brief outline gives us the means for explaining why his philosophy is called transcendental idealism. Because it restricts knowledge to appearances (our perceptions of the world), it qualifies as a form of idealism. The objects we have in mind, however, must conform to our understanding - the understanding that makes recognition of the perception possible. This insight - that the world conforms to our understanding of it - Kant saw (rightly) as a huge change in our way of thinking. He referred to it as the 'Copernican revolution in philosophy'. The 'transcendental' part of his philosophy is the establishing of the conditions necessary if there is to be any experience of objects at all. Such knowledge *transcends* experience. A couple of such conditions are that substances persist in time, and that every



event has a cause. The arguments he produces to identify such conditions he calls transcendental proofs and, if successful, they keep the sceptic at bay by showing his scepticism (which Kant referred to as the 'euthanasia of pure reason') is incoherent in that it violates the conditions necessary for experience to occur.

He maintained that non-human animals have 'sensibility' but lack 'understanding': they perceive the world around them, but do not have concepts about it. A dog may experience pain but not think of itself experiencing pain. This position, coupled with a regard for the welfare of other animals, led him to advocate a type of indirect duty approach in our behaviour towards animals.

A vital *practical* aspect of Kant's conception of reason is that humans are not just passive interpreters of the world, we are also agents who affect the world by what we do. For we humans, there is not just the matter of how the world really is: here the aim is to discover what is true and what is false. There is also the matter of, once the truth is known, knowing what to do about it. Here the aim is not truth but something else. Kant says it is *duty*.

Kant proceeds by distinguishing between the two types of reason for our action. One sort of reason for an action is because it benefits oneself as an individual. He called this sort of reason a 'hypothetical imperative'. 'Hypothetical' because the proposition being judged begins with an *if*; 'imperative' because the proposal for action contains an *ought*. e.g. If you want to become healthier, you ought to take exercise more frequently. Actions based on reasons of this sort are rational since they satisfy the individual's wants. Kant's second sort of reason for an action, however, is different in that it constrains us to behave in a way which *may not* coincide with our selfinterests. Here we accept a moral obligation to do something out of a sense of duty.

In cutting a cake equally, for instance, we are appealing to the reason of elementary justice in 'fair sharing'. Kant calls this sort of reason a 'categorical imperative' and it takes the form of 'I ought to do x whatever my personal desires are'.

We might argue at this point that *all* reasons for action are selfish reasons, that all imperatives are hypothetical, none categorical. This is a different claim about human nature which we will be looking at later. Meantime, Kant's reply would appeal to what he takes to be the common experience of the latter type of moral obligation that all humans show, that all humans acknowledge in their actions.

Before going on to the implications of his analysis for the human condition, we might ask about the status of the human mind and the rest of the world in Kant's philosophy: is dualism or materialism right? His answer is that we cannot know either way. All we know are the perceptions of the world that our minds receive. We can know the 'thing-in-appearance' but we can never know the 'thing-in-itself' since this lies beyond any possible experience. On the other hand, he rejected what he called 'soulless materialism' and outlined reasons of a moral kind for believing in immortality.

Kant thought that humans are free rational and moral agents, fully responsible for their actions in the world. He saw humans as *autonomous*, i.e. capable of choosing actions (or maxims) that are independent of our self-interests. His difficulty comes with how to reconcile this free will with the determinism to be found in this physical world (a difficulty the Christian, for example, has resolved). Put very crudely (Kant is immensely subtle), he says that the way that we know the reasons for our actions (like my knowing I am writing this for the good of humanity) is different from the way we know the external world





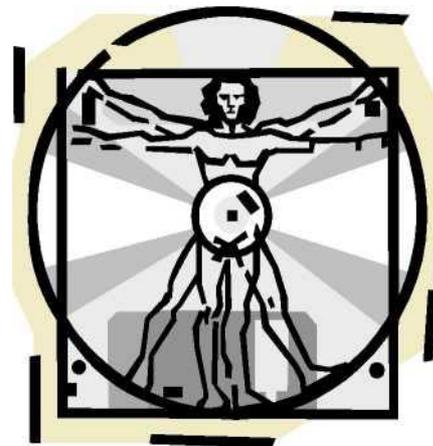
(like my knowing there is a monitor in front of me), different even from our awareness of our bodily states (like my knowing I feel like a cup of coffee right now). Rather than knowledge of our reasons being knowledge of a 'thing-in-appearance' it is knowledge of a 'thing-in-itself - the knowledge during reasoning is inseparable from the knowledge during reasoning. But we also know that our reasoning (the judgements we make) affects the world of 'things-in-appearance' where determinism about cause and effect holds sway. Kant has already said that we can only know about determinism in the 'sensible' world of 'things-in-appearance' so how come we 'know' about our reasoning having causal effects on this world since we cannot know a 'thing-in-itself? An answer is: thus our reasoning (and the capacity for free will in judging which actions to perform) cannot be within the deterministic realm. Whether this is Kant's answer is debatable. If it is the true answer then we can never know anything about reasons for people's behaviour (including our own): the real morality of any action is always hidden. This entails that we can never praise or condemn someone's moral judgement since they are never really aware of the judgement they have made: something that is hard to swallow for a Kantian given that he would wish to hold an agent responsible for their moral actions.

We must acknowledge that Kant has not provided a lucid argument that establishes the possibility of free will. He does, however, provide a *practical* defence of the moral responsibility of an agent. He says that in any situation where one is making up one's mind how to act, one cannot simultaneously entertain possibilities as well as think of one's decision as having been made. In other words, there is no escaping the necessity of making up one's mind and so, he says, we have always to act 'under the idea of freedom'. So from a practical point of view, we are already free even if the philosophical underpinnings are suspect.

### The Kantian Condition

As outlined above, Kant distinguished between our self-interest and our duty. He saw humans as beings which have a mixture of needs (for food, sex, status, love) and rationality (being logical, reasonable, recognising we have moral obligations to others). Conflict between these two sides of our nature is an inescapable part of the human condition. (This contrasts with, for example, the Christian who sees such conflict as escapable through obedience to God's will.)

A sceptic might question whether humans actually do have such a duty to others. Perhaps all our actions serve our immediate selfinterests, or our long-term self-interests. Kant will not allow this. He says that any rational being is compelled to acknowledge that they recognise this duty: the question of whether one would wish to be treated by someone the way they treat themselves is always a relevant one. Even thieves have honour, tyrants a sense of justice. Anyone without a sense of this duty is irrational and not a part of our society.



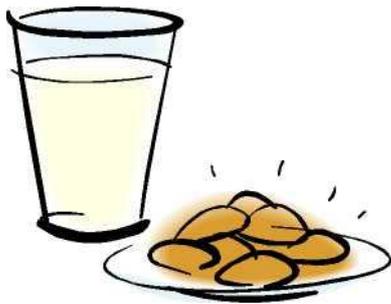


We can now turn to the problem of how Kant might resolve the tensions caused by the human condition - particularly the relation between the freedom of the individual to choose how to behave, and the social constraints imposed by the interaction of individuals in society.

His first step would be to point out the coincidence of rational thought and moral obligation: reason recognises duty. People will behave morally when they are rationally convinced that a particular action is reasonable. He made the general reasons for moral behaviour explicit in the form of 'maxims' which can then be assessed rationally. The persuasiveness of this position rests on the persuasiveness of reason itself - when something reasonable is pointed out to us, step by step, we become convinced of its truth - we believe it. Once we believe something to be the case, then we cannot act against it except by being irrational. If I believe smoking is bad for me, then it is irrational for me to smoke (avoiding the excuse of addiction). Likewise, if I believe that torturing flies is wrong, then it is irrational for me to torture flies. This interpretation underpins Kant's version of the Golden Rule where he says that one's behaviour should consist of acts that are universalisable:

*"Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."* (Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals)

But what could the Kantian say to the sceptic who said: "OK, I believe that I am doing wrong when I vandalise cars. No problem with that. But it feels great dragging a knife over someone else's paintwork. Why should I stop doing something I like for something I believe?" Before turning to Kant's answer we must look at why he rejects a more natural answer that involves rewards or punishments.



Getting people to behave well is a practical problem. Not just for parents and teachers of young children, but also for legislators and social reformers. A natural way of encouraging good behaviour is by offering rewards or punishments. These can range from the fairly trivial ('Do your homework and you can have a biscuit') to the absolutely crucial ('Worship me or you will fry in the everlasting flames of hell'). But this method does not answer the problem for the Kantian because it is appealing to someone's self-interests. Offering rewards and punishments is a form of coercion - it is attempting to force

people to conform to what one wants them to do. Coerced actions are not truly moral ones. Indeed, no ethical duty can be enforced in this way without violating the rights of free beings. This doctrine separates Kant's system of ethics from several other moral theories - utilitarianism would be one example.

To return to the vandal. Kant would point out that to this car-scraper, in asking why she should stop doing something she liked was, in effect, asking "Can't I just believe that I should always do what I like?". He would say this is irrational because it is not universalisable: we cannot continue as a human species if people are permitted to follow any emotion or feeling as they wish. This is because of our desires to fulfil our self-interests are bound to bring us into conflict with others unless they are governed in some way. If they are not checked by rationality, then society would quickly become anarchic where 'anything goes'. If the vandal replies to this "Suits me" then Kant could (rationally choosing irrationality) shoot her dead. Which she might not like. More likely, he would point out that it is incoherent to 'rationally choose irrationality': to choose, to make a judgement and then act on it, is to behave rationally. If it were possible for a human to stop choosing and behave without rationality (something very difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine) then they would be like the nonhuman animals. And if they were like nonhuman animals in this respect then they would no longer be due the moral duties we owe to humans. In short, acting merely on one's feelings suspends a person from the expectation of duties from others, and given what we know about human nature, this prospect is not so rosy.

However, Kant's form of the golden rule, his categorical imperative, is still controversial since there are cases which it does not cover. Remember that the categorical imperative tests maxims through doing



a thought experiment on them of the form “Can I will that this maxim become a universal law, i.e. one that all agents would choose to follow?” The idea of the thought experiment is to see if two things follow: the first is that the imagined law is consistent with itself (that is, it does not produce a contradiction); the second is that it is consistent with the agent’s own ends and hence is something they would consistently will. A maxim which passes the thought-experiment test is morally permissible. What if, after a disturbed night, I came up

with the maxim “I shall smother any crying baby that interrupts my sleep”? Though this is clearly immoral, it isn’t ruled out by the test. And what about something that the test rules out but which doesn’t appear to be immoral? An example would be “I’ll go shopping on Sunday morning as it will be less busy since everyone else is in church”. (If this were universalised, then the shops would be busy which is what I don’t want.) The existence of such examples shows that the categorical imperative is not the one and only premise capable of grounding Kant’s moral system - other premises are needed too. One might be that persons are always to be treated as ends, never as means, i.e. considered as individuals in their own right, with their own approach to life which must be respected, not as a means for furthering our own interests. This second premise requires a definition of what it means to be a person. If we say ‘a rational being’ then we are in danger of omitting young children and the brain-damaged (and, arguably, including animals such as chimps). Kant offers no other sort of definition and so the question remains open.

But we still have the problem of how it is that right actions and virtuous dispositions are to be encouraged in society. It is not enough that reason tells us something is right because, being human, we do not invariably follow reason: it is one thing to recognize an ‘ought’, quite another to do it. It is here that the Kantian appeals to God.

Although he produced a series of arguments that demolished the rational proofs of God’s existence, Kant was a Christian, though, as we shall see, he was unorthodox in his approach (so much so that he was banned from promulgating his views by the government of Frederick William II).

For Kant, wrong behaviour consists in subordinating duty to desire - the deliberate preference for one’s own happiness over obligations to other people (when the two conflict). He calls this tendency ‘radical evil’ and says it is a part of human nature. How might this be overcome? His answer is to invoke the notion of the ‘highest good’ which is ultimately identifiable with God. There *is* a relationship between virtuous behaviour and happiness, but this is not to do with happiness as deriving from the fulfilment of one’s self-interests. Rather, there is a final end of all moral striving and that is in the *combination* of all virtue and all happiness for all human beings. This he calls the ‘highest good’. What is clear is that the highest good does not obtain here on earth. The obvious next step is to say that justice requires there being what Kant refers to as a ‘Supreme Reason’ which governs according to moral rules and will guarantee appropriate rewards and punishments in a world to come.

This move allows Kant to keep his premise that moral actions should have nothing whatever to do with rewards or punishments. But it also provides humans with the hope that doing the right thing here on earth is not utterly pointless, that the ‘highest good’ really is possible.

A nonKantian might not find this very convincing. In the first place it certainly appears as if Kant wants to have his cake and eat it because surely the hope of one’s virtuous actions ultimately being rewarded (even if it is a generalised hope for all humanity) cannot be separated from the imputation of motives of self-interest. But far more damaging is the more robust assertion that being virtuous for the sake of being virtuous *really is* utterly pointless, that expecting justice in a world to come is merely pious hope rather than a realistic interpretation of the evidence. This would be a view that a utilitarian might put, adding that aiming for greater happiness in this world at least does have a point.



Further difficulties for Kant's ethical system lie in the problem of any hierarchy of duties. It is the case that in life we are often faced with a choice between duties. For example, one might have a duty to help a visitor find their way to Claridge house but also have a duty not to be late for a lesson. Which duty should one satisfy, which leave unfulfilled? Remember that, for an action to be moral, a Kantian agent should not take into account any of the consequences of the action performed. The *only* consideration should be whether the action is performed for the sake of duty. This rules out any sort of consequentialism which we might use to resolve such conflicts.

Another criticism of Kant's duty-based system of ethics is that it seems counter-intuitive to say that behaving in accordance with one's inclinations cannot count as being moral. Thus feeling sympathetic towards a crying child and comforting her is not a moral act according to Kant since an emotion (feeling sympathy) is involved rather than the pure dictate of reason. In defence, it has been argued that there is nothing wrong with having emotions while behaving morally but that Kant is only insisting that the motive of duty should be paramount in some appropriate sense. What this 'appropriate sense' would consist in is problematical itself if one is not allowed to appeal to consequentialism.



To sum up, a Kantian exists in a world the existence of which cannot be known with certainty. What is certain is the world as it appears to the individual. And this world conforms to the categories of thought to be found within every rational person. Humans have a nature where it is inevitable that there will be conflict between our desires and our duty to others. Humans are 'transcendental' in that they defy the causality that is found in nature and freely choose their actions and hence are responsible for them. Practical reason dictates that humans aim to do things which can be universalised. The ultimate aim for all one's actions is towards the 'highest good' where happiness and virtue are maximally combined. This implies a concern for all others irrespective of their status with regard to ourselves. The justification for the existence of the possibility of this 'highest good' is the existence of God. Hence life has both a meaning and a purpose.

### A Christian Life

At the core of Christianity is a commitment to belief in God. This God has the characteristics of the Gods of other monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Islam: it is Creator, Judge and Ruler of everything that exists; it is all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good. A distinctive feature of the Christian God, however, is that it is a personal being, one that takes a great interest in individual humans and their lives. Indeed, humans are conceived as having been created in the image of God and of being imbued with some of its divinity. For these reasons, I will adopt the more usual practice and refer to this God as a 'him' from now on.

The most obvious philosophical difficulty that arises immediately is the basic premise that such a God exists. But I shall put that to one side for the present. Not because it isn't interesting, but because here we are concerned with the distinctively Christian conception of human nature and its implications for the human condition. So, assuming that God exists, how do Christians conceive of the way we should live? Answers to this can be sought in the Bible. It is here that the nature of God and his plan for humankind is laid out.





Firstly, we have to ask if what is written in the Bible is *literally* true. The justification for answering 'yes' to this (the fundamentalist's answer) is that God is perfectly truthful, the Bible is the 'Word of God', and thus the Bible is true. The problem here is that it runs into conflict with another system we have for ascertaining truth: reason and logic. For example, the Bible contains two accounts of the Creation which are incompatible in several places (in the first account, for instance, animals are made before man and woman, whereas in the second account a man is made first, then animals, then woman). In other words, they are inconsistent with each other. Logic tells us that if we have an inconsistency in two accounts then both cannot be true. Hence it is reasonable to say that, here at least, the Bible is not literally true. Fundamentalists can reject this system, trumping it with the Almighty God card whenever it is played, but this puts them beyond the reach of philosophy. Philosophy depends on rational discourse and those who reject rationality are, by definition, beyond argument.

Given the unattractiveness of the fundamentalist position, many Christians are content to take the Bible as more like a guide than an instruction manual - something to refer to for help in living rather than something providing a definitive prescription for life: where there is inconsistency, let there be allegory; where there is conflict, let there be reinterpretation. That said, it is pretty clear what a Christian life should be.

In the first place, the relationship between God and humankind is special: humans were created as a distinct species. Not only is this set out in the Old Testament but it is confirmed by Christ in the New Testament. For many Christians this rules out any evolutionary explanation of human nature. (The Roman Catholic variety of Christianity allows that evolution has occurred but insists that the process has been for essentially the same purpose: to produce a species with a special relationship with God. This, at the very least, constrains any naturalistic account of our nature.) Thus, the existence, purpose and meaning of humankind are all conceived primarily in relation to God: it is our duty to love and serve God.



[It is interesting to note that, for some reason, at least initially, God did not want two things for humans.

The first was immortality - given by eating fruit from the Tree of Life. The second was the capacity to behave morally - given by eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God specifically forbade humans from gaining either of these. But, famously, this was disobeyed for ethical knowledge when Adam and Eve ate what is popularly depicted as an apple. Christians believe that they can gain immortality now as well - not through any frugivorous activity, but through constancy to God.]

No other species occupies this privileged position with respect to God. Indeed, the Bible records that God gave humankind dominion over the rest of creation, including all animals. Given this premise, and the created distinction between humankind and every other living thing, this justifies treating animals differently from humans. In other words, the boundary for moral action stops at the extremity of *Homo sapiens*.

Whether females have the same relationship to God as males is rather difficult to ascertain from the Bible. Christians still dispute among themselves about it. The Old Testament is certainly very patriarchal with God almost always being referred to in male terms and there being a huge emphasis on the production of male descendants. But there are also references in the New Testament to women occupying an inferior position to men, and only being saved through child-bearing. It is noteworthy that when Christ chose his disciples he came up with a male to female ratio of 12:0. That said, modern interpretations of God's intention on this issue provide for equality of male and female *souls*, if not of their corporeal rank in any church hierarchy.



## Christian Freedom

The central point in the Christian account of human nature is the notion of freedom. Humans have the capacity to choose either to love and serve God at all times, or to not do these things for more or less of the time. In other words, one obeys God's will or one does not. This is a major contrast with other central points. The Greeks (Plato and Aristotle, for example) put the ability to attain rational knowledge as the highest fulfilment available to humankind. The existentialists put the exercise and assertion of the will in the same place. The humanist would probably put the harmony of all humanity there.

The first thing to note, then, is that Christian freedom lies in obedience. There is no necessity for any intellectualising over issues, one simply does what God wishes. Indeed, this obedience to God's will is regarded as a *virtue* (Abraham was rewarded for his willingness to kill his only son simply as a sacrifice to God). What is wrong with human nature is that it is flawed and we choose to sin rather than constantly carry out God's will. What is needed is for us to ask God to forgive us for such sinning and restore the relationship that he created in the beginning.

This introduces a second Christian concept: salvation. Here the regeneration of our relationship with God is made possible through the grace of God. [*Grace* here means mercy, love and forgiveness.] The Bible recounts how God has shown himself willing to forgive by providing covenants (a sort of legal agreement between a conqueror and a subject state) to Noah, Abraham, Moses; and to save humankind through sending a Messiah. Through Jesus, the Christian can achieve the relationship with God that is the one that God wants. This proper relationship contains a third concept: immortality.



Given that a contrast is made between 'the spirit' and 'the flesh' by Christ, this would perhaps lead us to concluding that Christians are dualists philosophically. This is not necessarily so and we should be wary of reading Greek ideas (or Cartesian ones) into the Bible. Indeed, St Paul's distinction between spirit and flesh has a more materialist flavour seeming to contrast a person regenerated through their relationship with God and a person as yet unregenerated. Thus, the Christian's soul does not have to be identified with, say, a Cartesian mind, separate from the body and continuous with the immortality of God.

This materialist flavour is reinforced with the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Here the physical substance of one's body lives with the soul in an eternal life with God. This idea is fraught with philosophical difficulties. Destruction of the body (through explosion, dismemberment or cremation, for example) would seem to make resurrection impossible to achieve. However, since resurrection of the body is a belief set out in the Christian Creeds, to be consistent a Christian needs to provide an explanation for how this is possible. Fortunately, God is omnipotent. Thus, he can reassemble all the atoms of one's body at, or after, death wherever he wishes. This solution to the problem raises other difficulties.



The first is generally known as the Cannibal Problem. If a cannibal eats a missionary then presumably atoms from the missionary go to make up part of the cannibal's body. If the cannibal repents on his death-bed, which resurrected body (missionary's or cannibal's) gets which atoms? This problem is compounded by modern scientific knowledge which tells us that carbon atoms, for example, are continually recycled



and that the carbon in humans alive today includes atoms that have already made up other humans since deceased.

A second problem is that if all the atoms that constitute our body at death are reassembled then (if we died a natural death) presumably the body would pack up and die again immediately.

A related problem is whether our bodies are somehow restored to perfect functioning. Would older people have their heart muscles re-strengthened and their arteries rendered softer? Would mental powers such as good short-term memory be restored? In short, when does the replacement of parts render something a new thing? (This is an old philosophical conundrum. Jason voyages with the Argonauts and his ship ages. Piece by piece he replaces the sails, the rigging, the masts, the decking, and so on. By the end of the voyage he has replaced every last part of the original material.

Is it the same ship? Further, if some entrepreneur followed Jason and collected all the parts Jason jettisoned and put them together again, which ship would be Jason's, the old, the new, or both?)

The Christian can reply to these problems by saying that God puts together any old atoms he likes (or that he creates new ones) that will make up a body capable of housing the dead person's soul. This gives rise to difficulties with personal identity.

If God can create a facsimile of my body after my death from any atoms - and not *my* atoms - then presumably this could be done a) before I die, and b) as many times as his patience allows. But these possibilities conflict with the notion of personal identity being consistent with a singular occupation of space and time by an individual.<sup>1</sup>

This consideration has led some Christians to abandon the notion of space and time for the existence of God and souls altogether. Whether it is intelligible to have something existing neither in space nor in time is a moot ontological point which need not be considered here.

Finally, the Christian might abandon the Creeds and reinterpret the Bible as establishing that the body and the soul are distinct entities. Descartes, for one, thought that his dualism was 'congenial' to the idea of immortality although he never put forward a sound argument in its favour. But if the Christian takes this route then they run into the philosophical difficulties that beset the dualist.

## The Christian Condition

The Christian finds herself in an imperfect world, one in which there is sin and suffering. What is the meaning of life in such a world? And what should she do in it? The best (and perhaps the only) answer to these questions is to have faith in God<sup>2</sup>. Given this faith, then the Christian can proceed with confidence.

For the Christian, life has a clear meaning: humans exist as beings that God has created to have a relationship with. It also has a clear purpose: humans should strive to enter into a full relationship with God. The formula for achieving this purpose is clear too: obey God's will in all things. Though all these appear to be straightforward, they do pose problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Such a notion is crucial to a meaningful judgement being made on a Christian's life. For justice to be done it seems essential that there is some sort of continuity of person throughout life (and beyond).

<sup>2</sup> Despite the best efforts of many thinkers, there has not yet been produced a sound argument for God's existence. Hence belief in God cannot be established rationally. The idea that belief in God must involve a leap of faith (an emotional commitment) somewhere along the line is called fideism.



Although we are not going to question the existence of God, we ought to question God's nature. This is because, for the Christian, humans are made in the image of God and share something of his nature. (I am also going to grant that God is the one creator of the universe, the one who framed the laws that govern it, the one who judges all that occurs in it. None of these have much material relevance to the problems that follow.) The first problem for the Christian is to reconcile three features of God that do not appear to square with the empirical knowledge we have of the world: that he is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good.

### The Problem of Evil

It is an empirical fact that innocent children suffer in the world. Given that God cares about humans, then why does he not stop this suffering? Because he is incapable?



No, he is all-powerful. Because he is unaware of it? No, he is all-knowing. Because he wants the innocent to suffer?

No, he is perfectly good. Imagine a human being in the place of God. For example, a woman who sees her child painfully entangled in some barbed wire. The woman has wire-cutters and the strength to free the child; she has the knowledge of how to do it quickly and painlessly; and yet she does nothing to intervene and her daughter goes on screaming. We might say that the woman is not perfectly good. Why does the Christian not say the same of God?

One way of answering is for the Christian to point out that the argument rests on an analogy. Such arguments are only valid if the analogy is a good one. Is the analogy between a human being and God good in this way? The non-Christian would say 'yes' because isn't this what Christians themselves believe - that we have a nature that is the image of God's? The Christian would say 'no' because God's nature has certain crucial differences, one of which is his divine purpose. This transcends the individual circumstances that individual humans find themselves in at particular times.

We might then ask the Christian why there is evil in the world at all since this seems to contradict the notion of a perfectly good God. One reply is to say that the empirical evidence is wrong, that, in fact, there is no suffering. A sharp thump on the nose might convince the Christian who replies in this way that physical suffering is real. If not, it would illustrate that even if there is no physical suffering, *mental* suffering is equally unpleasant and that this exists<sup>3</sup>.

So, the Christian is forced to appeal to the divine purpose to explain the evil in the world. There are two sorts of evil that need be accounted for: that due to human activity, and that due to natural disaster<sup>4</sup>.

With respect to the first, the standard account is the Free-Will Defence. It runs like this. God has chosen humans to help fulfil his purpose. God's greatest gift to humans is to give them real responsibility for helping in this work: we are not mindlessly following a prescription, at every point we can choose what we think is the best way of fulfilling God's purpose. For this choice to be real, and so for us to be

<sup>3</sup> A Christian cannot retreat the whole way back into solipsism since this would deny God, as well as denying that God created other human beings, and these are both basic Christian tenets.

<sup>4</sup> A less popular account (due to St Augustine) is that evil is a just punishment for the human disobedience shown by Adam and Eve. It is less popular with Christians as it places justice above compassion in a hierarchy of virtue.



responsible for it, then we must be able to choose to subvert, even pervert, God's purpose. And some humans do this. They do not follow God's will and from their actions stems the moral evil we see in the world. This is not what God wants, but is a logical necessity which follows from humans having the will to choose freely.

With respect to the second, the standard account is to see natural disasters as a provision for greater good. Famines, plagues, earthquakes and storms all provide more opportunities for exercising Christian virtues such as hope, compassion, generosity and fortitude. Since employing these virtues in reacting to such disasters strengthens our relationship with God, then ultimately they are good things.



One might object to the second account in two ways. Firstly, there is the empirical evidence that there seems to be quite enough evil due to human activity in the world to provide us with plenty of opportunities to exercise the Christian virtues without visiting us with more floods or pestilence. Secondly, if the account is a good one then why does God not multiply the disasters by a factor of ten, or a hundred, and so provide even more opportunities? We could *all* be Job if God wanted. This objection seeks to undermine the Christian's argument by *reductio ad absurdum* -

following its logic to a ridiculous conclusion which thus shows the argument must be wrong.

Objecting to the first account, the free-will defence, calls for a closer scrutiny of the notion of free will itself, as well as the basis of moral values in the Christian context.

At the heart of Christianity there is a tension between two basic beliefs. The first belief is that salvation, the redemption of the soul, can only come from God through his offering of himself in Christ. Faith is all you need and our salvation is not affected by what we do ourselves:

*"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God - not of works, lest any man should boast."* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

On the other hand, there is the belief that our will is free and that it must be by our own choices in life that we can generate a full relationship with God and so be redeemed.

The first belief, about redemption through God's grace, seems to encourage the idea that God has not, after all, allowed us free will in that he has maintained complete and utter sovereignty over us. This might encourage a rather fatalistic approach to life, and one where one is less concerned about the actions of others in the world. Alternatively, full free will seems necessary if we are to be responsible for our own salvation. This would give the Christian the impetus to behave much more socially in the sense that our actions can be an example to others which must contribute to the amount of goodness in the world.



With this tension in mind, we can now turn to what it means to have free will, and hence behave as a moral agent, for the Christian. Before any moral choice can be made, the agent must be aware that there a choice is possible. After that, the Christian has to ask herself whether her action would accord with God's will or not. Where does the knowledge of what is God's will come from? One authority here is the Bible, particularly the Ten Commandments.

These are:

1. You must have no other god.
2. You must have no totems.
3. You must not blaspheme.
4. You must keep the seventh day holy.
5. You must honour your parents.
6. You must not kill.
7. You must not commit adultery.
8. You must not steal.
9. You must not lie.
10. You must not envy others.



These are supplemented by the teachings of Christ, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, where he outlined the characteristics that find favour with God. He said it is blessed to:

1. be poor in spirit
2. mourn
3. be meek
4. pursue righteousness
5. be merciful
6. be pure in heart
7. be a peace-maker
8. be persecuted for the sake of righteousness

and he urged publicising one's good works as this would add to the greatness of God:

*"Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, who is in Heaven "* (Matthew 5:16)

He also taught the Golden Rule: to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself.

Remember that, for the Christian, doing right is doing God's will. And doing God's will is obeying his wishes. Although the Bible provides the basis for determining what God's wishes are, it is not fully prescriptive. Taking the commandment not to kill, we might reasonably ask 'Not kill what?'. If it is an absolute commandment, then we should kill nothing at all. This seems an unlikely wish for God to have. If we wished not to kill anything at all then we never eat anything since this involves killing the bacteria that live in our food and our mouths: when we swallow the bacteria are killed in our stomachs. So killing bacteria for the sake of eating seems reasonable. Can we extend that to killing plants for the same



purpose? Not killing plants is a more realistic possibility since humans could live on fruits and leaves which does not involve killing the whole plant (as long as one is careful). And this could certainly be extended to the killing of animals for food. But many Christians are not even vegetarians, feeling that the commandment applies only to the *human* species. And, of course, many Christians do not stop even there, accepting that the killing of humans is permissible in some circumstances.

You will have noticed that using this example we have moved from the simplicity of an absolute commandment onto the less certain ground of having to decide for ourselves where a line is to be drawn. One way of avoiding this decision is to scour the Bible for circumstances that seem to fit the ones we find ourselves in and then read how God (or one of his chosen people) behaved. However, examples can readily be found that many people would regard as morally reprehensible - using biological warfare against an enemy for example, or genocide, or killing every first-born child in your enemy's families, and so on.



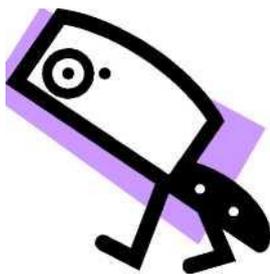
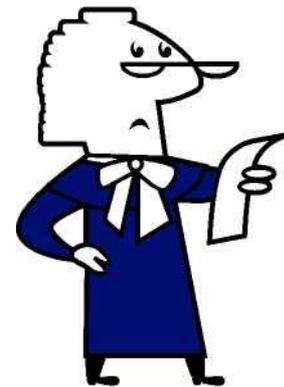
A second way is to appeal to the authority of the Church.

This is a Christian institution that is there to help guide Christians as to how to achieve a true relationship with God. Unfortunately, history provides empirical evidence that this is not always the right thing to do. There are countless examples of different guidance being offered by different Christian groups - so much so that the groups persecute, torture and kill each other for their perceived 'heresies'.

A philosophical difficulty in using authority (either of God or the Church) as a guide to behaviour is the question of whether one's actions are even moral at all. As an example, take a man about to kill a child. If he were simply to ask himself "Am I *commanded* to do this?" I think that most of us would say he is not acting as a moral agent. It is no defence for a soldier who has killed a child to claim that he is innocent because he was obeying orders. And, of course, the same argument applies to doing good. If one is ordered to say "Have a nice day!" to everyone, then one cannot claim to be nice oneself because of it. To be truly moral one has to make a decision about whether the behaviour is *really* good or bad, not just whether the authority *says* it is good or bad. Hence, we might say that Christian obedience is *amoral* - it is simply following orders.

But this cannot be right. The Christian would point out that God's wishes and what is right are congruent, that they are the same thing. Thus the choice between obedience and disobedience is precisely the same as the choice between right and wrong - and this is moral behaviour.

One might press the point a little by asking the Christian just how morally free they are when they believe that they have Authority watching over their every thought. How free would you be to break the motoring rules, for instance, if you really believed you had the police and a judge sitting in the car ready to mete out punishment for any infringement? The Christian's reply is that this is the way the world is: given that God exists, the only way you could *not* be subjected to his constant scrutiny is if he did not exist - which is logically impossible.



But the Christian does not just have to appeal to authority. A third way is to 'look into one's heart'. This does not mean that one should use one's reason. It means that one should look there for God's will. It means appealing to one's emotions, one's feelings, about the circumstances in which one is situated rather than reason. This is fine so long as the emotional response is the right one, of course. In its favour we can say that no ethical system based solely on reason has yet proved wholly satisfactory, that emotion has a crucial

role to play in our moral behaviour. Against, we might be concerned at the licence it provides - after



all, Jack the Ripper claimed to be doing God's work (presumably after 'looking into his heart') by butchering prostitutes. What, if not to reason, could we appeal to if we were to try and convince Jack that what he was doing was, in fact, wrong?

Another option for the Christian is to pray. This is a direct appeal to God for something the Christian wants - like good health and good weather, for instance. But it is also used to appeal for moral guidance. This option raises again the worry about simple obedience not being enough to count as moral behaviour as well as the possibility mentioned in the previous paragraph of an individual who has not heard God's word but instead has some psychological problem leading him to 'hear voices'.

To come back to the Free-Will Defence, the Christian can claim to have free will in the sense that it is identifiable with having or lacking obedience to God's will. But we can still ask if, *in reality*, it is possible for us to all disobey God's will? Has God given us a will that is capable, if consistently disobeying his wishes, of vanquishing God himself? If 'no' then we cannot be truly free - God knows that he is safe. If 'yes' then wasn't it reckless on a cosmic scale of God to give us free will and so allow the possibility of the destruction of the Greatest Good in the universe? The latter does not square with God being perfection (unless recklessness is a virtue - something hard to concede) whereas the former lands the Christian back with not being a moral agent.

Finally, we might ask why God did not set up a universe in which free will was possible but suffering was not. The Christian response is that this is logically impossible: one cannot have good without evil, if one is to have a choice. In reply one might say that such a thing *is* possible: one could freely choose between being kind to someone or ignoring them - one does not have to go out of one's way to be unkind.

One final consideration for the Christian approach to this earthly life is how much importance to attach to it. In terms of the eternal life ahead, life on earth is of negligible length. How important it is otherwise depends on whether the Christian's life on earth *affects* whether she will enjoy the eternal life with God or not.

Remember the tension between whether one is saved solely through God's grace or whether one's works played a crucial part. Tending towards the former concept might lead to neglecting the lives of others and a concentration on one's own salvation through strictly following Christ's teaching by giving up natural earthly relationships together with any wealth:

*"If any man come to me, and hate not his mother and father, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."*

(Luke 14:26)

*"If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast, and give to the poor."* (Matthew 19:21)



This is the sort of strict, ascetic life that inspires the likes of hermits, monks and nuns. Though these people may be charitable too (and so help others on earth) they see their main role as a rigid adherence to God's will. Their lives are effectively cut off from the rest of society - but their prayers for us may, of course, help. Those Christians who lean more towards the latter concept, where what one does makes a difference to one's relationship with God, are more inclined to exercise the Christian virtues for the good of all of society - indeed, ideally, for any person at all, notwithstanding their relationship, colour or creed. This injunction, to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' is an ideal to which to aspire. It strikes many as impossible to achieve given our human nature - we will (nearly?)

always favour our own mother over someone else's, for instance.

To sum up, the Christian Condition has many merits: it gives a meaning and purpose to life; it provides guidance as to behave morally both to individuals and, by implication, to social groups; it encourages



greater harmony between humans by emphasising their equality of status before God. But, as we have seen, it is not without certain problems with respect to our nature and how we should live, even without questioning the existence of God in the first place.

## An Existential Life

Many different philosophers have espoused an interpretation of the human condition in existentialist terms. Unsurprisingly, they vary in which aspects of existentialism that they emphasise (and hence in the conclusions they draw) but there remains a central core of thinking common to all.

We'll have a look at this core first before glancing at some of the variations applied to it.

One thing that all existentialists agree on is the uniqueness of the individual and their situation in life. This contrasts with philosophies that look for general theories about human nature which, the existentialist would say, leaves out the thing of greatest importance. Secondly, existentialists emphasise the meaning or purpose of human life rather than being over-concerned (in their view) with scientific or metaphysical truths. Hence subjective experience has a greater importance than anything objective.



Thirdly, there is the emphasis on the freedom of human beings and how exercising this freedom can produce what they refer to as an 'authentic' way of life. I'll examine these in more detail below.

Although there is an existentialist dimension to most of Christian thought, and the first modern existentialist thinker (Soren Kierkegaard, 1813-55) was a Christian, I am going to treat the more 'mainstream' type of existentialism which is definitively atheistical. My main reason for this is that, besides being more complete in that it does not require what Kierkegaard recognised as a nonrational 'leap into the arms of God', it provides a sharper contrast with the two sorts of life we have already looked at.

### The uniqueness of the individual

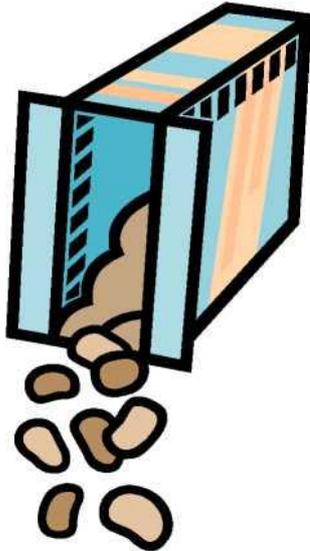
Existentialists start with a rejection of the idea that it is possible to establish meaningful generalities about people. This is because such generalities leave out what is essential to being a person in the first place: each of us has a unique perspective on the world in which we find ourselves, a unique appreciation of ourselves, a unique attitude to life. This starting-point is in sharp contrast with other approaches which seek to build on characteristics that are found to be common among humans. The attractiveness of emphasising the individual is that it ties in very neatly with the strongly subjective characteristic of consciousness. To my mind, *my* pain has a characteristic that is wholly lacking from the concept of pain in general. It has a first-person quality that is inaccessible to third-person analysis, to objectivity in other words.

So, the existentialist starts with the premise that there is nothing essential (in the sense of a fixed and defining 'something') about humans. This is not to deny that humans



have nothing in common with each other: the basic appetites for food, sex, shelter and freedom from harm are taken as basic attributes, much as they are for other animal groups. What is different about humans is their self-conscious ability to take an active part in carving out a distinctive life for themselves. Hence, for the existentialist, it is the case that we exist, but we are not born with a nature or with a purpose. What we do is create our own essence through shaping our lives. This is a radical and emancipating idea summed up in the slogan 'existence precedes essence'.

It also sets ethical issues at the centre of its philosophy because, not having a 'given' nature, then it is crucial that humans see the question 'How should I live?' as the most important of all. This perspective provides another contrast with other, more analytical, philosophies which set such questions as 'What can I know?' and 'What exists?' at the centre of enquiry, turning to ethical questions thereafter.



Perhaps the place to start is to see what can be said about the capacity for self-consciousness, the characteristic that can form an essence for a human. The German Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) agreed with Descartes in that we can be absolutely certain of our own conscious awareness. However, that conscious awareness cannot be aware of itself, it is always conscious *of something*: it cannot just exist by itself. In other words, one cannot separate a state of consciousness from the object of consciousness. Thus, in 'I want a chocolate' the desire (state of consciousness) cannot be thought of as separate from the chocolate (object of consciousness). All our mental states are directed towards some object. Husserl saw this as a fundamental quality of the mind: consciousness is always *about* something. He called this 'aboutness' *intentionality*.

Husserl also agreed with Hume that our experience will never allow us to distinguish between the state and the object of consciousness.

When I *experience* the mental state 'I want a chocolate' that is just one thing. Certainly, I can *conceptualise* about it and talk about the category of desire, the category of chocolatey things, but conceptualising and experiencing are not the same thing. (Animals do the latter, we can do both.) This idea has armed sceptics with a potent weapon - the question of how we can claim any knowledge of a world outside our own consciousness. This is where Husserl makes an original move. He says that there is absolute certainty that our objects of consciousness exist as objects of consciousness for us. For me, the chocolate I want certainly exists as a mental object *no matter what other existential state it might have*. What we can do is investigate the objects of our consciousness without any reference to any independent existence at all - Husserl described this approach as 'bracketing off' the question of separate existence. Thus he started a whole new school of philosophy which deals with the systematic analysis of consciousness and the objects found in it. This school is called **phenomenology** and it uses the grounding of self-evident intentional content (we know the objects of our consciousness with certainty) as an absolute ground for everything else - our experience of other people, grass, gases, galaxies, and so on.

Another German, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) developed Husserl's philosophy by reacting against one part of it. Husserl thought in traditional terms of subject-object:

I, as the subject, have a relation with the desired chocolate, the object. Heidegger called into question whether our basic way of encountering things and people actually required subjective experience. He observed that normally the relationship between people and things is not a subject-object relationship at all. This might seem an odd



claim at first sight. However, when you are writing something, for example, you are not acting as the subject in relation to an object (the pen). Unless something goes wrong (it runs out of ink, say) the pen does not exist as an object as such - you are not thinking of the pen at all. The same goes for the ink and the paper you are writing on. You might even not be thinking of what you are writing (while copying out your address you might well be thinking of whether to eat another chocolate, for instance).

This insight is a profound change from the traditional views of human subjects existing in a world of objects. Such views naturally lead us to ask questions concerning our perception and our knowledge. Heidegger's view is that such questions are misconceived at the most fundamental level because humans are not subjects in a world of objects, not detached from a world that is 'out there' in some way, but that we are inextricably in amongst it all from the very start. Characteristically, we are existences in an existing world and it is from this position that we have to start. If what he says is true then we must acknowledge that most human activity is not guided by conscious choices at all - it as though we are on a sort of 'auto-pilot' - and hence a good deal of the analysis of behaviour would have to be re-thought. It is certainly true that we can reflect about things, but this reflection only occurs when something goes wrong with our coping with the world - like the pen running out of ink calls our attention to it as a pen. It is only at this *second* stage of behaviour (reflecting on things) that humans become the rational animal beloved of philosophers. A *third* remove from everyday behaviour is to look at the pen's structure and form. This stage (beloved in the analytical tradition) leaves out the very practicality that gives the pen a meaning for us. This third stage is important to the world of science but notice that this is where science is proscribed - it has no way of entering the second stage, let alone the first. Thus, Heidegger (and many other existentialists) is dismissive of the attempts by science to explain human consciousness.

Given this background, what it is to be a human being is itself radically different from the traditional view. Humans exist in a world of shared things and activities, our existence is wholly relational to these. We should think of ourselves as being a part of this relation, as an activity going on against the background of everything else in the world. What the existentialist starts with is not a person as traditionally conceived, but as something which Heidegger called *Dasein*. This means 'existence', but also, when broken down, 'being-there'. It refers to the concept that humans are part of an on-going situation, something *sharing* the world rather than reacting to it, or contemplating it. Asking whether other humans exist is meaningless: *of course* they exist otherwise my capacity for even thinking of the question in the first place would not be possible. What happens in the social case is that part of the situation in which I find myself, and in which I act, is given by the social norms that prevail. I'll return to this point with more detail when we look at the existentialist condition.

Sartre (1905-1980) offers another way of convincing oneself that other people exist. We know it because of the fundamental knowledge we have of our own feelings. His illustration is to imagine oneself spying on someone else through a keyhole. Whilst spying, one may have no particular mood. But to hear a noise, turn and see that another person has been watching you at the keyhole brings about the feeling of embarrassment that nothing else can bring. If the noise turned out to be a cat or a street-sound then the embarrassment would disappear. We are guaranteed our feelings as being certain, so our feelings can guarantee the objects that elicit them - in this case, other people.





## The meaning and purpose of human life; and existentialist freedom

The existentialist has no external, given, meaning or purpose to their life. As we have seen, the *Dasein* is swept along in a world, generally not reflecting on what they do or what the other parts of the world do, rarely reflecting on any decisions at all. Social constraints in terms of the norms of the society in which we find ourselves mean that we are steered towards a position and mode of behaviour that is just an average.

These considerations make us seem pretty close to being mere animals, responding thoughtlessly to what the world throws at us. But what sets us apart is bound up in the existentialist concept of *authenticity*.

All of us, each *Dasein*, is aware (albeit dimly at times and for most) that there are no grounds for certainty about the existence of the world, and consequently there is no *reason* for doing the things one does in it. This is rather a disturbing thought to have (Heidegger calls it *unheimlich* - not being at home). Our response to a disturbing thought is anxiety, or *angst*. One way of getting rid of this anxiety about how to behave is to do what is expected, i.e. be average in all things. But, according to the existentialist way of thinking, this is to abandon what it is to be *Dasein*. It is to be inauthentic. The alternative is to acknowledge that to be *Dasein* is to have anxiety, that anxiety gives *authenticity* to one's life. From this perspective, it doesn't matter so much what you do as how you do it. You are not really free to do whatever you want (the social norms constrain you there) but your attitude is all yours: decisively choosing to be a train-spotter is authentic; being rebellious because your friends expect it, is inauthentic.

So, there is no cosmic meaning or purpose to human life in general. However, one's own life is of cosmic importance to oneself. And of key importance here is asserting oneself through the choices one makes in life. This gives the existentialist both meaning and purpose: the meaning is to be authentic, the purpose to be as authentic as possible.

The freedom that the existentialist enjoys is that of seeing that there is no single meaning to the world. But if we acknowledge that there is no God to give our lives shape, no meaningful duties to humanity, then things look rather pessimistic for us. Nietzsche (a crusading atheistical existentialist, 1844-1900) gave a name to the condition of the realisation of the meaninglessness of life, and the abandonment of any countervailing activity, as *nihilism*. Whether an existentialist can be optimistic about the human condition we can turn to now.

## The Existentialist Condition

Reflective consciousness guarantees that human beings have the freedom to choose how to behave in the world. The choices that we make are thus real choices (they are not determined, in other words) and hence we are responsible for them - we cannot blame anyone else for our actions. But what might an existentialist have as a guide to conduct?

Authority, such as the Christians' God, is immediately ruled out for the atheist. Another possibility, that there are universal concepts (Kant's 'categories') which all humans use to organise their understanding of the world, is also rejected because of the existentialist's claim that all humans are unique in their world-view. What were once taken to be absolute and unchanging truths about how humans appreciate the world are undermined: the categories of thought can change with time and from culture to culture. This ushers in the notion of relativism - that there is no truth at all, merely truth that is relative to current culture. If one accepts this relativistic view then one must abandon any pretension to better knowledge or behaviour of one group rather than another: we are not more knowledgeable than the Ancient Greeks; we cannot condemn other cultural practices either.

Leaving to one side the question of whether relativism is true or not (if that has any meaning) its effects are important. It means that the 'values' that an individual adopts are not there to be discovered - they



are created. For an existentialist like Sartre, this freedom to choose extends a fair way beyond the limits that have been thought of as within our control. Emotions, like sadness and anger, have traditionally been accepted as being outside our conscious control and hence actions which are under the influence of such emotions are more or less excusable. But no, says Sartre, we are responsible for our emotions too since they arise from the ways in which we choose to react to the world. Not only are our emotions no excuse for our behaviour, even longer-lasting characteristics are our choice too. For example, being shy or being domineering are characteristics about us that we can choose to alter if we wish. The existentialist is constantly faced with choice, and is constantly aware that they are responsible for the choices they make. This constant consciousness of freedom, *angst*, colours all that the existentialist does.

Being anxious all the time is not a comfortable condition in which to exist. One way of escaping it, as mentioned above, is to comply with the norm. If the individual does



what is expected then the anxiety will disappear since the real choices about how to behave have already been made by the social group in which the individual finds themselves. If the normal thing to do is to give £1 to a charity, then if I stump up £1 for that reason alone, then I have not made a choice at all - 'society' has chosen for me. It is worth repeating here that it is the *attitude* that is important - I could give the £1 in existential 'good faith' if I had thought it through myself, adopted responsibility for the action myself. What is 'bad faith' for the

existentialist is to merely conform. This is because conforming is denying the uniqueness that is the individual, the *Dasein*.

It is this idea of 'bad faith' which gives the existentialist guidance as to their behaviour. In his book *Being and Nothingness* Sartre gives an example which illustrates the point. A girl is sitting in a Parisian cafe talking with a man who, she has every reason to suspect, would like to seduce her. The man takes her hand. The girl continues to talk to the man as if her hand is as unimportant as a teaspoon on the table. This is 'bad faith' because the girl is pretending not just to the man, but to herself, that her body can be distinguished from her thoughts, that she is not fully responsible for her body as well as her thoughts. Rather than pretending, and hence avoiding choice, she should do something - smack his face, take away her hand, give him a smile, whatever.

Notice here that we have a contrast with other views of human nature. Psychologists, for example, have theories about part of our nature being the result of *unconscious* mental activity. Of the girl in the cafe who continues to talk as if her hand has not been taken, one might say that she unconsciously desires seduction by the man. Indeed, he could be excused on these grounds of further intimacy - like putting his other hand on her leg, for instance. Existentialists will have none of this since the individual is responsible for all that they do (and feel). There is no such thing as an unconscious desire that is somehow repressed from consciousness because how could this happen? How could one repress an 'unconscious' thought without consciously thinking about it? One psychological theory is that, at one stage in their development, a boy wishes to sleep with his mother. This incestuous idea is repressed but influences him in steering him towards a mother-substitute, a girl like Mum. But it is impossible to 'suppress' the thought 'I want to sleep with Mum' without consciously thinking of the thought itself. This shows that 'unconscious' desires are impossible (because it is illogical), and disallows any escape for the individual's responsibility for their behaviour.

Existentialism, at first sight, seems to be a charter for unrestrained individual behaviour: be true to yourself, exercise your will in all things, seize the moment!



What is there to make us take other people into account when we consider what to do in our lives?

Well, one constraint lies in the world in which we find ourselves - for the existentialist we are born into a world and are an inextricable part of it: we have to be influenced by our surroundings since that is an inescapable part of being human.

And these surroundings include other people with their own points of view, their own lives, their own expectations and actions.



For some existentialists, interactions between people are always a matter of a battle of wills. In any human relationship there will be one person seeking to dominate the other, to turn that person into an object rather than a subject. The thinking behind this is that unless one asserts one's own will, if one merely submits to someone else's will, one is being inauthentic by acting in 'bad faith'. This does explain some human conduct but not all of it. It might be used, for example, to explain the competitiveness we see in such things as business, education, sport. However, it is not so plausible as an account of the relationships found in, say, religious communities, where it seems perverse to deny that acts of pure altruism take place. (We will come across a different, perhaps more satisfying, explanation for this when we turn to the naturalistic account of such relations.)

To go back to the individual, if there are no reasons for behaving in any particular way apart from avoiding 'bad faith' then human choices will be totally arbitrary. If this is the case, then the existentialist might be driven to commend someone who 'authentically' chooses to devote his life to the brutal extermination of some race or other. This is an unpalatable consequence of ethics derived from existentialist principles. One way to avoid it is to include a premise about respecting the freedom of others as being of equal value to one's own. This Kantian idea is, however, hard to make consistent with the premise of always acting authentically since it is difficult to see how equality between oneself as a subject could ever be achieved with another who is, inevitably, not oneself.

### On Existential Ethics

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) was close to Sartre for much of her life and, unlike him, wrote a book on ethics entitled *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. The primary difficulty for the existentialist is that, for the existentialist there are no objective values which might inform any individual's behaviour. This difficulty is compounded when it is acknowledged that no individual can achieve any goal they set themselves: we are always separated from the object of our consciousness (given the intentional nature of our consciousness) and thus can never achieve the synthesis of our consciousness of our goal with our goal.



To many, the existentialist approach is the philosophy of despair - nothing seems to matter: I am nothingness and nothing I do makes a difference to anything. And existential ethics seems impossible: there is nothing to say what counts as 'good' or 'bad'. De Beauvoir addresses these difficulties by going on the attack.

Firstly, she points out that those who condemn existentialism as a useless philosophy are making this judgement from an 'objective' point of view. Since existentialism is pointing out that 'objective' points



of view are no more justifiable than 'subjective' ones, this judgement is worth no more or less than its opposite. Whether existentialism is 'useless' depends wholly on the individual to whom it has (or has not) any meaning in their life.

Secondly, she claims that once an individual has recognised their lack of being (as nothingness) this immediately discloses our will to being. This will to being is our wish to create the world and its values and it is here that we find our meanings, values, judgments are made. In short, it is our sense of freedom that is the source of anything we find to be significant to us. She identifies this freedom with morality: 'to will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision'.

She acknowledges that there are no external guides to help us decide what is morally 'right' to choose. However, we can justify our actions and goals 'from the inside' by having the strength to persevere in our will (which, you will remember, is something with a strong Nietzschean flavour). A 'right' choice then simply becomes a choice that does not deny freedom, but develops it. This can be extrapolated so that the existentialist strives for their individual freedom and the freedom of others too: 'to will oneself free is to will others free'.

Critics have pointed out that, even if this analysis is correct (and many see various flaws in it) it is no reliable guide to how to behave in the world. How can we put another's freedom over our own? How do we choose 'greater' over 'lesser' freedoms if we have no objective way of deciding between them? Can we condemn anyone for abandoning their freedom? What is our justification for opposing wilful acts that we regard as perverse?

Her reply might be the robust: You are missing the point. The point is that every individual must make the best decision they can, at that moment, for themselves. Hoping for anything objective to shape individual choice is a self-delusion'.

To sum up, the existentialist concept of personhood is as a 'situation' in a world not of their choosing. The person is a part of the world, conscious of that world and experiences it from a unique point of view. The existentialist recognises that there is nothing prescriptive about their existence, no human nature, no divine plan. Recognition of this fact inevitably gives rise to anxiety about the choices one makes but puts the question of what one *does* in life at the centre of what it means to be human. Life itself has no meaning (it is 'absurd') but realising this truth gives the individual a different meaning: to produce one's own essence through embracing the anxiety due to being conscious of one's own freedom and acting authentically by accepting responsibility for one's actions and being. Other people will have their own meanings for life and this will produce conflicts of interests in social relationships. There is no such thing as absolute truth and so the resolution of these conflicts must appeal to the actions of the individuals themselves: only the degree of authenticity that an individual is employing can count as a criterion for whether the actions are to be approved or not. A satisfying life is one in which one has striven to always choose rather than merely comply.



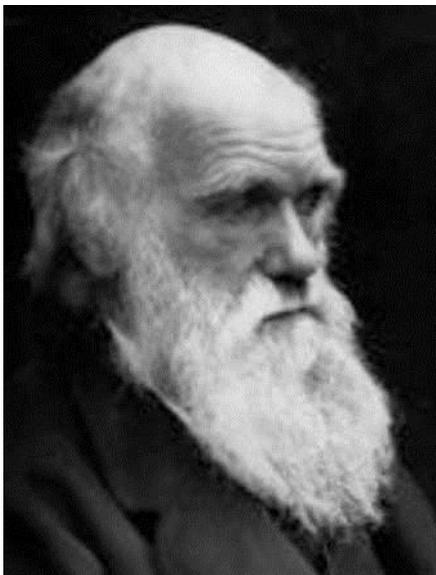
## A Naturalistic Life

'Naturalism' I will use as a name for a group of philosophies which seek to provide explanations which are wholly natural, i.e. ones which belong to the world of nature and which can be examined using the methods appropriate for studying that world. It attempts to include subjects such as ethics, aesthetics, and the mind within its ambit. Such subjects have traditionally been seen as so different from things like gases, grass and galaxies that they demand a different treatment altogether. Naturalists beg to differ.



The metaphysics of naturalism is commonly materialistic: all things which exist depend on a material substance. Although it is possible to be a non-materialistic naturalist, I will ignore this less-obvious interpretation and concentrate on more mainstream views.

What all forms of naturalism insist on is that all explanations should be capable of being unified, at least in principle. Thus, for instance, the mind should be amenable to science - the principles of psychology should rest on, or fit together with, the principles of other sciences such as biochemistry and neurology. Similarly, aesthetic appreciation and ethical behaviour should also fall under the principles used to explain the rest of the natural world. Thus, naturalism specifically excludes any explanations which include entities that are beyond the scope of scientific examination: occasional interference in the world by souls or spirits, be they divine or human, are disallowed.<sup>5</sup> In this way, naturalism can be seen as seeking to apply the methods of science which have proved so successful in discovering other properties of the world (the physical properties such as substance, composition and time). Thus naturalists identify most closely with empiricism.

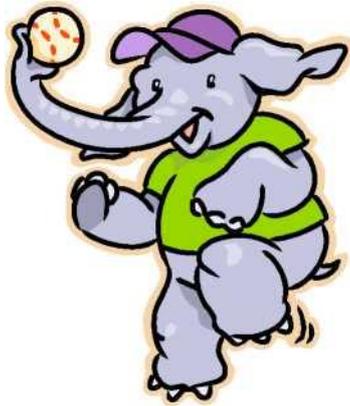


A naturalistic account of what constitutes human nature cannot ignore the theory of evolution by natural selection that Charles Darwin gave to the world in 1859 in his book *On The Origin Of Species*. Before this time, the common belief was that humans were special in two ways: we were nearer to perfection than other beings; we contain a divine element that is a mark of a special relationship with God.

The first of these ideas can be traced back to Aristotle who set out a 'natural ladder' which recognized an increasing complexity and capacity in nature - from inanimate rocks on the bottom rung, through plants, through animals of various sorts, to human beings. (Christian thinkers extended the ladder from humans, up through various categories of angels, to God.)

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<sup>5</sup> This does not rule out God. All it does is demand that God fits in with nature - a compatibility that is certainly possible to believe in. Natural theology is the name of this type of belief.



Humans sit at the top of the ladder (in the physical world at least) due to the complexity we share with mammals, but with the added capacity of conscious and reflective thought. Thus we have a natural superiority to all other beings. Darwin's naturalistic account of the living world destroyed this notion of supremacy by showing that *any* organism's complexity or simplicity, *any* capacity that organisms have, is the result of selection based on one criterion alone: does it help in the reproduction of the species? In other words, there is nothing special about being complex rather than simple - both types (and every sort between the extremes) are merely solutions to the challenge of successful reproduction. Similarly, there is nothing special about one capacity rather than another - our view that

large brains are somehow a 'naturally' superior characteristic is just plain biased: an elephant might justifiably take the view that the capacity to manipulate things with an outgrowth of the face marks out superiority; a tapeworm that the capacity to resist digestion is superior; and so on for all species. Brain-power is merely a characteristic that helps our species reproduce successfully, merely one type of solution to life's challenge.

The second of the ideas, that we contain a divine element which relates humans, and humans alone, to God, is made less plausible by Darwin's theory. According to the evolutionary theory, there has been a smooth continuum of beings which have been gradually transformed from one type into another over time. Go back a few million years and there were no humans and hence no 'divine elements' within them. The question which then arises is at what stage did humans gain this 'divinity'? If the soul is an all-or-nothing entity (and the concept of soul would itself seem to exclude the possibility of half a soul, or 1% of a soul) then it cannot be introduced in any naturalistic way. Two ape-man (and soul-less) parents could not produce a child with a soul and still have a natural relationship with it. Try to imagine a human baby being brought up by chimpanzees: it is highly unlikely that the human would grow up to be human in the full sense of the word - for one thing, it would not have a language worth the name.<sup>6</sup>

Given Darwin's theory, it is inevitable that our nature is coloured by our ancestry. However, the extent of that colouring is debatable, with views ranging from the faint ('it explains some relatively unimportant parts of our thought-processes') to the vivid ('it influences everything in our minds'). We will return to this debate later when I look at the naturalistic condition. By nature, then, humans are social animals. We have evolved as a successful solution to life's challenge by employing certain strategies which rely on the characteristic of having a large brain. Examples of such strategies would be our enhanced efficiency in acquiring nutrition, our peculiar reproductive behaviour, our language. These strategies make us what we are: a being that is human.

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<sup>6</sup> Responses to this would be either to allow souls to evolve too (so that fractions of souls are permissible), or for God to intervene at the stage of evolution where He considers physical humans ready to have souls conferred on them so that they can assist in His plan for the universe. Or, of course, to reject theories of evolution out of hand as per the fundamentalists who adhere to creationism.



With all this as background, we can ask for a naturalistic account of what we know about ourselves and the world in which we live. As I mentioned above, naturalism tends to be empiricist in holding that all the knowledge we have stems from our interactions with the physical world. It rejects any rationalistic claims to *a priori* knowledge - a stance which separates it from the Kantian interpretation of knowledge where, you will remember, experience (the mental objects we have in our minds) and rational understanding (the concepts and their categories) are considered to be indivisible.

At this point, we might ask the naturalist what are the foundations for knowledge if the rational element is excluded? After all, as Kant pointed out in opposition to naturalists like Hume, having sense-experiences does not constitute knowledge as humans have it - we *understand* those experiences. The more modern naturalist might follow W. V. Quine (a contemporary American philosopher) in rejecting the traditional empiricist view that sense-experiences form the basic units of thought. Quine<sup>7</sup> maintains that the *theoretical* aspects of scientific observation must be taken into account when asking how knowledge is acquired. It is not individual observations on the world that count alone, but the systems of beliefs that have been built up over time, both by the individual and by society. These belief systems form an interconnecting web with beliefs near the periphery (formed by direct or indirect observations on the world) being more easily challenged, adjusted or reversed, than beliefs near the centre where adjustment would necessitate the adjustment of many other belief systems. A belief at the periphery, for example, might be that all dogs belong to a single species - finding out that this is wrong is not especially upsetting to other sorts of beliefs we have. But a central belief, such as 'all effects are the result of a cause', if shown to be wrong would have far-reaching effects on all the other belief systems which assume this to be true.



An objection to this account is that it means there are *no* foundations for knowledge since any of the belief systems can, in principle, turn out to be wrong. In reply, the naturalist would say that that is the way it has to be. Knowledge and doubt cannot be separated: as soon as knowledge becomes possible, doubt is inevitable because this is what knowledge consists in - the capacity for choosing one belief rather than another. As soon as we appreciate that there is choice, we also appreciate that the choice *could* have been different. To doubt is part of being human.

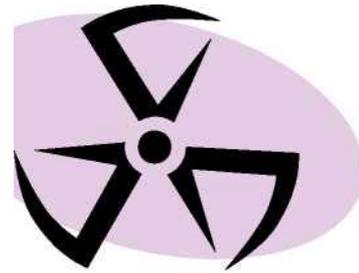
Another aspect of the naturalistic view of life that deserves attention is the problem of determinism. In a mechanical universe there would seem to be no room for free will - everything a human does is the result of a causal chain of events that is inevitable. (More will be said on this subject in the section on 'freedom and determinism' later.) But if there is no free will then it makes no sense to hold people responsible for their actions, just as we don't hold people responsible for the plainly automatic reflex reactions that they show. A couple of naturalistic replies might be to speak of how

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<sup>7</sup> His account is known as naturalised epistemology.



*probability* is natural, and of how *quantum indeterminacy* is natural. Neither of these is satisfactory as a means of allowing for free will. Probability is a measure of likelihood *given that the event is determined*. It looks at outcomes given a particular cause, but all of the possible outcomes are determined by that cause and so a 'free' choice of outcomes is unattainable. Quantum indeterminacy refers to the nature of the fundamental particles of matter which exist in an either/or mode. A well-known example of this is the effect of radioactive decay which has no cause - specifically, the emission of a radioactive particle (an event) can never be predicted because there is no trigger for it happening (no cause). Using this feature of the world it might seem to allow for events which are not determined. But even if this is true it doesn't help matters because though events such as radioactive decay are uncaused they are absolutely random. Holding people responsible for actions that are a result of a random process (over which, of course, they have no control since it *is* random) is as senseless as doing the same because the actions are determined: in neither case is there any agency involving free will.



A final question is whether there is a possibility of a naturalistic account of our own, very subjective, experiences. To us, the world as it seems and the world as it is collapse into one thing. We can be certain, for instance, when we are in pain. It makes no sense to ask oneself if the pain being experienced is real or not - we know it with certainty either way. This is not the case with other people's pain: the appearance of pain and the actuality of pain are separable. Now naturalistic accounts are objective since they aim to be accounts that can be generalised. How, then, can we give an objective account of a subjective phenomenon? A reply to this<sup>8</sup> is to distinguish between two types of subjectivity in the world. 'I am hurting' is a subjective statement. The two ways in which is subjective is firstly as an opinion (I, and only I, know if it is true or not); but secondly as a mode of existence (only a human could entertain it as a thought rather than just an experience). Now it is the case that other people cannot gain knowledge of the first type of subjective experience, but they could certainly investigate the latter and find out if the pain exists, where, to what degree, and so on. This would allow some empirical - and scientific - observations to be made on subjective experience and hence produce objective knowledge of the subjective condition.

### The Naturalistic Condition

So what does the naturalist make of our place in the world? Firstly, we might look at the implications of insisting on natural explanations. This has led some thinkers<sup>9</sup> to a position from which they insist that philosophy should be scientific and, ultimately, prove capable of unifying all scientific principles. In other words, everything should be reducible to physics.

As alluded to already, one attractive aspect of science is the way it makes progress in securing greater knowledge of the physical world. If the method of science could be applied to the human mind, together with our behaviour, culture and social institutions, then secure knowledge could be generated here too. And once we have such knowledge then we have a better opportunity to control these aspects of the world in a way we would prefer. This is optimistic and, for many, shows a misplaced optimism.

There is room to doubt that the scientific method employed to discover the physical world need necessarily be the same as that used to discover knowledge of our minds and so on. If our minds, for

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<sup>8</sup> due to John Searle

<sup>9</sup> I refer here to positivism.



example, are not of the same type of thing as atoms and the like, then the science that worked for atoms might prove useless for minds. This objection can be accommodated by the naturalist by allowing for varying levels of explanation, each appropriate to a particular level of organisation. Thus, to take water as an example, features such as surface tension and capillarity can be explained at the atomic level, whereas features such as wave action and fluidity can be explained at a different level. This is a move

away from everything being *reducible* to physics but without shifting from naturalistic ground. This can be dismissed as mere hand-waving: airily saying that the mind *just is* like simple physical things is an assumption unwarranted by the plain evidence which is that the features of the mind, notably intentionality and the subjectivity of sensation, are clearly not of the same type of thing at all. This debate has yet to be resolved.

The goal of the naturalist is to gain complete knowledge. Within this concept of complete knowledge is the acknowledgement that *absolute* knowledge is unattainable - as indicated above, there is an ineluctable element of doubt that is included in any sort of knowledge. The level of doubt that can be tolerated within the naturalist system is undefined. To critics, this is a weakness because, without definition, the extent or the limitations of knowledge can never be discovered. This means that when belief systems clash, there is no *independent* means of measuring which system to prefer. These critics would depict the naturalist as living a life which is at the mercy of the current belief system: the system only being liable to change not with the discovery of greater certainty but with the introduction of some new, and merely psychologically-attractive, belief system. On the other hand, naturalists see this as a strength for two main reasons. Firstly, it is foolish to claim *any* certainty given the knowledge we *have* discovered: history provides the evidence both that our belief systems have not been perfect in the past, and that the analytical method employed by science has proved efficacious in improving the belief systems we have. Secondly, though the limits of knowledge cannot be satisfactorily defined, with our increasing understanding of some parts of the world we can understand the constraints on future possible knowledge. Thus, though it is logically possible that (nonmedical) decapitation might not lead to death, we are certain that it is physically impossible to survive it. The gap between absolute certainty and physical certainty is the price we have to pay for being human: it is something to live with and is best simply ignored.

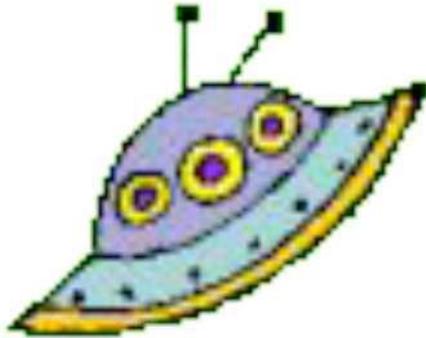
One implication of the naturalistic condition that has been popularised recently stems from speculation on the capacities of the mind in evolutionary terms<sup>10</sup>. The approach here is to take as premises, a) that our nature evolved as a means for enhancing reproductive success, and b) that this nature evolved at the same time as modern humans i.e. from 80 000 to 120 000 years ago, and has not substantially changed. As an example, take aggression. The aggression one sees within a social group of animals is directed in 3 general directions: i) towards individuals of the same species which do not belong to the group, ('outsiders' in other words), ii) towards individuals within the group lower in the hierarchy, iii) towards individuals within the group worth challenging to enhance one's own reproductive success. Given these observations, and the premises above, examples of the aggression we see in society have a ready-to-hand explanation. The reason why we hate foreigners, denigrate menial workers, try to look younger,

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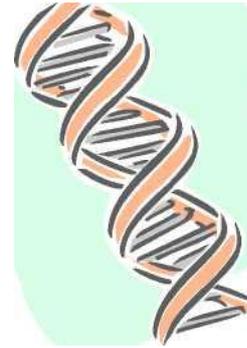
<sup>10</sup> Such ideas come under what is called evolutionary psychology. A close parallel to this view of humans as basically selfish individuals is also to be found at the heart of the economics theories that are based on the 'rational choice theory' which assumes that the individual will do things which will enhance their own material well-being first and foremost.



are all a result of the way our nature has been shaped by evolution. One further premise, first popularised by Dawkins, is that much of our basic behaviour is genetically determined. His argument is that behaviour is so important to reproductive success that it must be inherited via the genes.



This account of human nature informs our condition: Stone Age minds in a



Space Age society. To many people, this is a rather bleak scenario where humans are condemned to be forever constrained by a nature which is geared in one direction (reproductive success) rather than other, less natural, directions (such as increased global happiness) with which it may well conflict. Philosophically (not to say scientifically), however, there are several problems with

this interpretation of the human condition. The foremost is the assumption that our minds now are, to all intents and purposes, the same as they were 100 000 years ago. Empirical evidence against this would include how our minds have changed in recorded history (which extends a mere 5 000 years or so). The mind of a human who lived in Ancient Greece is so different from a living human that a special effort has to be made to gain an appreciation of the way they saw, and hence behaved in, the world.

Another objection is to the insistence that behaviour is genetically determined and hence pretty-well instinctive. More empirical evidence against this would be, for instance, the increase in IQ by 27 points in 5 decades in the UK, the modern recoil from a word (e.g. 'nigger') that was commonplace a century ago. These show the mind's capacity to be influenced more by social norms than any 'innate' ones since neither of these, except by rather tortuous reasoning which sounds like special pleading, are attributable to a drive for reproductive success.

Leaving this view of our nature to one side, we can now turn to what the naturalist might say about the values we have. Given that evolution has taken place without any divine guidance or plan, then how are we to acquire our values and hence know how to behave? The straight-forward answer is that our values are simply invented to suit the way we live (or wish to live)<sup>11</sup>. Thus, we must simply accept that, as in other social constructs including art and science, there is no absolute truth to be found in our ethical values, that all is relative to culture and time. Naturalism would reject the Kantian approach as relying on principles that we derived from reason alone - we do not have duties. But we might *invent* duties to live by. These invented duties may then be discarded or supplanted when their time has come or a cultural shift occurs.

To the non-naturalist, this seems to be an intolerable abdication of moral responsibility, and one that is logically incoherent. To this the naturalist would point out that this explanation of the world best fits the evidence around us - that we have to live with it, and base our behaviour on it.

And this brings back the question of determinacy: can we be held responsible for our actions in a naturalistic world? Free will might be construed as a 'higher level' characteristic that emerges from the

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<sup>11</sup> This is a form of relativism.



functions of the brain. In short, it cannot simply be reduced to the physics involved in brain action, but is natural all the same. But naturalists have yet to offer a plausible account of how this might even be conceptually possible, runs the objection. Without some sort of underpinning, it makes little sense to entertain it as assumption on which to base something as crucial as ethical behaviour. An answer of sorts to this is to point out that *no* philosophical system has provided a sound basis for ethical behaviour and to demand it of naturalism is unjust. The approach should be scientific: treat it as a 'black box' which we are unable to open at

present and work around it merely using it as a marker. Just like a good deal was learnt about genetics decades before people had a clue what a gene actually was: treating 'gene' as a mystery in a black box proved fruitful and there is no reason why ethics should be any different. To this the non-naturalist would re-introduce the argument that here the assumption is that ethics and genetics are the same sort of thing, amenable to solution by the same sort of approach. If they are not of the same sort (and it appears unlikely) then this approach will not work effectively if at all.

At this point we might ask what is the meaning or purpose of a naturalist's life? This is where individual liberty and social constraints interact. An individual might choose *personal* fulfilment as a goal whereas the society into which they are born might decide that fulfilment for *the majority in society* is the goal. Such a debate opens up questions for political philosophy: the balance to be struck between the two concerns may be, in principle, impossible to achieve. This is because natural concerns for (in order) self, lover, family, friends, colleagues, community, nation, and species will always reflect this hierarchy of importance whereas social goals in the widest sense ignore this hierarchy<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, it is worth pointing out the more egalitarian side of the naturalists approach. Not only are all humans necessarily equal (since we are all basic units of the one species), animals can also be drawn into our moral considerations. The latter stems from the fact that all beings share the Earth as a result of evolutionary processes which do not discriminate on grounds of type. This has led some philosophers<sup>13</sup> to advocate much greater moral concern for the welfare of animals than has traditionally been the case. They draw parallels between discriminating on grounds of gender or race with our discriminating on grounds of belonging to one species (human) rather than another: they talk of 'speciesism' as being akin to sexism and racism. They say that drawing a line between individuals on the basis of type is indefensible and that grounds of suffering, or rights, should be substituted for this biological accident of birth.

To sum up, the naturalist finds himself in a world that, though still mysterious in parts, is amenable to explanation and understanding. There is no plan or goal to life other than fitting in with others in society and deriving enjoyment (and avoiding unpleasantness) where one can. Social constructs and norms are open to being changed and life ameliorated if not now, then in the future. There is an inevitable edge of doubt in everything we think but, once this is noted, it need not be disturbing, merely be taken as part of being human.

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<sup>12</sup> Humanists might say that a goal for humanity is to continue to add to the glory of human achievements.

<sup>13</sup> Notably Peter Singer and Tom Regan



## Confucianism

### Biographical introduction

Confucius (551-479 BC) was orphaned as a youth, loved learning and, when adult, travelled widely in China offering his services as advisor to the feudal lords who ruled there. He was never successful at achieving a position of influence such that his teachings were put into practice. He returned to his home state of Lu (now in Shantung province) and devoted the rest of his life to teaching. Having been born into the K'ung family, towards the end of his life he became known as the Great Master K'ung - *K'ung Fu-tzu* - which became westernised as 'Confucius'. After his death, his teachings were set down by his followers into *The Analects* (Lun Yu). These focus on humanism, outlining how humans should best live out their lives. It has little to say on metaphysical questions - e.g. gods, souls, being, time and death are not considered.



### The Decree of Heaven and Destiny

What is central to Confucianism is '*t'ien ming*': the Decree of Heaven. This concept embraces the notion of an over-arching Heaven which provides a moral imperative for governance; not just the governance of society, but also the governance of each individual of their own conduct. To achieve the best life, one must obey the Decree of Heaven. However, though it is a mandate, humans have the free will to ignore and to disobey it, but when they do, then a poorer life results. We will look at more of the specifics of the Decree later.

Another important idea is '*ming*': Destiny. This is the part of the world over which human free will has no effect - it contains things that are fundamentally out of our control. Confucius identifies such things as one's place in life, social success, wealth and longevity as being under Destiny. And since we can do nothing about Destiny, then we should not be concerned with such material pursuits. What we can (and should) do is pursue the Decree of Heaven - something that is within everyone's grasp.

### The Way

Broadly speaking, '*tao*' is the path which, if followed, will lead the individual to the best state. If individuals follow this path, a direct consequence is that society will also achieve its best state. For Confucius, '*tao*' meant the way of the sages - ancient rulers of earlier, ideal, times. It is the path of proper conduct, one which wholly conforms to the Decree of Heaven. Following the way brings inner tranquillity and joy. Getting to this state full-time is not an overnight process. Confucius pointed to his own sojourn:

*At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the line.*

By turning to what specifics Confucius identified as being central to achieving the best life (or following the way), you should become clearer about the various stages he is referring to in this passage.

### The Human Condition

It was as clear to Confucius as it is to the rest of us that the world is not at its best: people suffer due to their own life choices as well as those of others. Added to this, there are natural evils which afflict



humanity. Now, he said that some of this is out of our hands - Destiny cannot be altered. The reason for our other sufferings he put down to 5 things:

- Attachment to profit
- Lack of filial piety
- Our words and our actions not matching
- Ignorance of the way
- Absence of benevolence

Taking these in turn, by 'profit' Confucius meant people who did things for their own gain rather than doing a thing because it was right. It is not just the narrow material 'profit' that he has in mind. Rather, it is doing something after thinking selfishly - will doing this make me feel better, be better regarded, and so on. What one ought to be doing is what is right *regardless* of how it affects oneself. This has a distinct Kantian flavour you will have noticed: acting out of goodwill is the only good in itself.



Filial piety is the unswerving loyalty of a son for his father and, by extension, for the governed to the Governor.

Confucius set great store by what we call 'family values'. The father, as the keeper (and exemplary practitioner) of these family values, should be obeyed always: "Never fail to comply" he offered as advice to sons. For Confucius, well-governed families are the bedrock on which society rests.

Words and actions not matching covered two important things for Confucius. In the first place, the word for something should really mean that thing. For example, a 'son' is not simply 'male offspring', the word 'son' also must mean the embodiment of what a son should be in terms of attitudes and responsibilities. If this is not the case, then stability is

undermined since we cannot know what we are referring to. Secondly, there can be no trust in human relationships if people say one thing but do another.

Confucius recognised that ignorance stands in the way of development. Scholarship is important in that studying of the Classics (6 books concerned with the lives of the sages) provides insights into how to behave in a great variety of situations. Without such knowledge, following the Decree of Heaven is much harder.

Benevolence (*'jen'*) is the term he uses to talk about proper human relationships. The state of benevolence is to be aimed for at all times and incorporates following the 'golden rule' and observing the 'rites'. Confucius gives two formulations of the 'golden rule' (generally glossed as 'do as you would be done by'). The first is positive: 'a benevolent man helps others to take their stand in so far as he wishes to take his stand'; the second negative: 'do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire'. However, we do not know what to do in any given situation unless we have been steeped in the 'rites' (or '*li*'). These 'rites' are the behavioural codes that have been culled from the Classics mentioned in the paragraph above.

We can now return to Confucius' sojourn as an outline of the way:

*At fifteen I set my heart on learning* [serious study of the Classics]; *at thirty I took my stand* [put the proper conduct of the rites into practice]; *at forty I came to be free from doubts* [by practising rites he came to really understand them]; *at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven* [which led him to understand the Heavenly plan of governance]; *at sixty my ear was attuned* [a union of his will with the Decree of Heaven]; *at seventy I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the line* [he acted spontaneously with benevolence at all times].



Finally, he drew a distinction between a sage and ‘chun-tzu’ the gentleman (for Confucius, an ideal moral figure of his time). The ‘gentleman’ and the sage both follow the rites but their attitude is not the same: for the former, they are followed due to modelling their behaviour on the sage; the sage follows the rites spontaneously. A more familiar example might be the master violinist and the student violinist. They both play the fingering pattern identically. However, the student is following the pattern while the master has *internalised* the fingering pattern and playing freely.



**Human Nature**

Although Confucius was optimistic that every human *could* become a sage, he thought few would (he said he had no hope of ever meeting one, for instance). There is some dispute about whether he thought humans were born good and needing to be guarded against corruption; or born evil and needing to be guided to the right way.

He did observe that human diversity is due to the choices people have made: ‘men are close to one another by nature. They diverge as a result of repeated practice’.

There have been two later developments of Confucianism which do address our core nature. The first came with Mencius (371-289 BC) who taught that we are born good. We have a compassionate heart given to us by Heaven in which there are four ‘seeds’ that, if nurtured, will become virtues:

Heart	Compassion
Stomach	Love
Shame	Modesty
Wisdom	Righteousness
Knowledge of right and wrong	Propriety

Mencius supported this claim to innate goodness by pointing out what he saw as a universal human characteristic: our compassion. He said that if anyone saw a small child on the verge of slipping down a well, then they would be immediately moved by a compassionate desire to save it - rather than any consideration of personal gain. He thought that our hearts are often ensnared during our lives, and this leads us into evil.

Hsun-tzu (298 - 238 BC) flatly disagreed: ‘man’s nature is evil; goodness is the result of conscious activity’. He likened human being to pieces of warped wood that require steaming and moulding to get them into shape - this pressure being observance of ritual. He substituted Mencius’ scheme for the heart with his own:

Heart	Propriety
Stomach	Righteousness
Shame	Wisdom
Wisdom	Compassion

Most Confucians take Mencius’ line. Notice that both interpretations are very consistent with the teachings of Confucius, however - particularly with respect to the following of the ‘rites’.



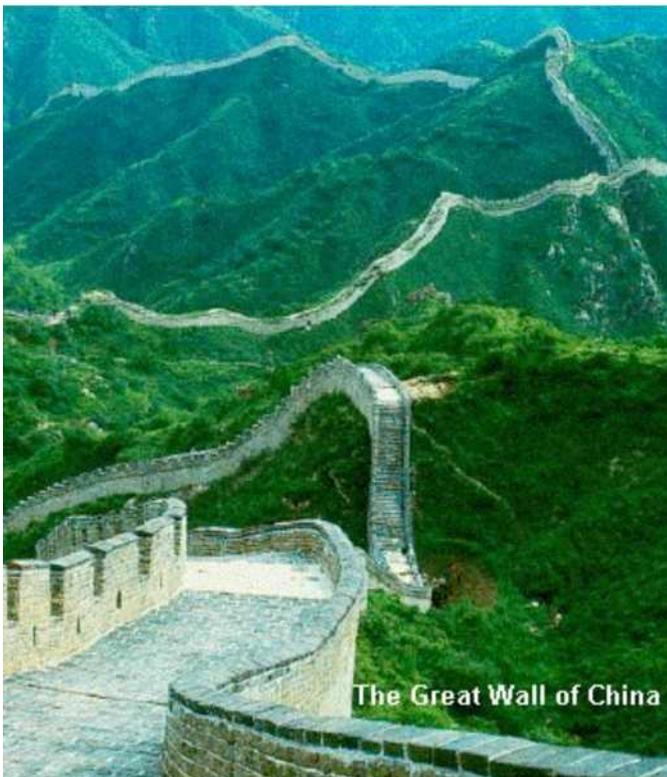
## Observations

One reason for the lack of regard for Confucianism in the West is its commitment to the obedience to 'superiors'. The assumption is that the 'superiors' have arrived at the Truth about all things. It also relies on current leaders being selfless, wise and wholly benevolent at all times - a thing which flies in the face of the facts, if not in the face of reason. It subordinates the great mass of people to the whims of the few. None of these is very palatable to western tastes.

Another reason is its essentially conservative character - it constantly looks to the past for guidance. This past is guarded and disseminated by a small coterie of Confucian scholars who, we may assume, might well have, or have had, their own agendas when producing 'interpretations' of Confucius' ideas. This reverence for the past may well stifle novelty and creativity in people (things seen as being worthy of cultivation and praise in the West).

A third reason is its lack of democracy. The common people seem to be excluded from the Confucian enterprise (needing to labour rather than study). Women are also regarded as inferior - Confucius' view of human perfection is decidedly masculine and where women are referred to, it is generally in a very unflattering way.

Finally, as it is simply a pragmatic approach to life, without any metaphysical arguments underpinning its teachings, it lacks any links with any reality other than what people are doing. The Taoists, for example, criticise Confucianism for this narrowness of concern, this utilitarian approach which, unlike Taoism, fails to appreciate the usefulness of uselessness. However, you should bear in mind that there have been developments of Confucian thinking (neo-Confucianism) in which metaphysical questions are addressed.



## Freedom and Determinism

One of the great metaphysical problems about human existence is the source and extent of our freedom to choose how to act. You will appreciate that this is a central question for all of the interpretations of human nature that we have been considering, ranging from the 'radical freedom' of the existentialist, through conditional freedom in Confucianism, to some sort of 'naturalistic freedom' which might not be



the normal idea of freedom in the sense of a *real* choice ever being made. This latter interpretation may seem to stem from the acknowledgement that we are physical beings alone and, as such, are subject to physical laws. And since physical laws tell us what *must* happen given certain conditions and a certain stimulus, whatever we do might be seen to be *determined* - freedom is an illusion.

Determinism is the name for the idea that all events are determined by prior causes. It implies, for instance, that there is just one possible future and that this future is predictable. It can be seen to stem from what is known as the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Put at its simplest, this principle is that everything has a complete explanation, i.e. given conditions C, a certain state of affairs S, will necessarily follow. If S is the universe, and we could find out what C is, we can be certain what the future will be.

The success of science, based as it is on discovering the exact deterministic relationship between things in the world, provides strong support for extending determinism universally. However, if determinism *is* universal, then this threatens another apparently certain truth: our actions are not determined, i.e. that we have free will.

Given this apparent clash, we have 4 options:

- reject both determinism and free will
- reject free will and accept determinism
- show that free will and determinism are compatible and hence accept both
- accept free will and reject determinism

### **Determinism no, free will no**

The first option, abandoning both notions, is unattractive unless we have something that can replace them. So far, no-one has come up with any fruitful ideas here.

### **Determinism yes, free will no**

The second option leads to some debate. Those attracted to it are generally referred to as 'hard determinists' and they dismiss free will as an illusion. The defenders of free will as being real have some grounds on which to challenge the hard determinist.

Their first objection is that we *know* that we have free will - it is an intuitive certainty that is as plain as any mathematical axiom or rule of logic<sup>14</sup>. In reply, the hard determinist will say that this isn't good enough. People have relied on intuitions in the past, but these have turned out to be untrue (like the Sun seeming to move across the sky, blood sacrifice being necessary for good crops, and so on). Better to rely on the determinism that science so successfully exploits.

A second objection to the hard determinist is to point out that all our morals rest on the truth of free will so we must believe it otherwise our ethics is fatally undermined. The hard determinist will shrug and say that this is just wishful thinking - wanting free will to be true is inadequate as justification for it being

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<sup>14</sup> The existentialist rests this human capacity for choice squarely on this knowledge of our own freedom - in Sartre's words we are 'condemned to be free' by our very nature. It is a fundamental truth. The sense we have of this freedom arises out of our type of consciousness: the self-conscious awareness we have that, when engaged in any activity, we could be doing something else but we are doing this. It is this awareness that we call freedom (see notes on existentialism).



true. I might want it to be true that I am the most charismatic person you'll ever meet but that doesn't make it any nearer the truth.

A third objection is more telling. It is to challenge the grounds for the hard determinist's own belief. To be consistent, the belief in determinism must come from certain inputs which ineluctably lead to the belief in determinism. In other words, the hard determinist has no *reason* for his belief, he *can't help* believing it because of the prior events. Without reason, determinism is mere dogma because it disallows any decision when choosing between sound and unsound arguments. In short, determinism is unreasonable and so is not to be favoured over free will.

A come-back from the hard determinist is to claim that sound arguments are more persuasive (i.e. have greater causal efficacy) than unsound ones. Thus, determinism, with its superiority in terms of sound arguments, is nonetheless the case. But this fails on two counts. Firstly, it is plainly not true that sound arguments are more persuasive - many politicians rely on rhetoric being more persuasive than sound reasoning, for example. Secondly, the hard determinist is confusing two quite different things: causal influence is nowhere near the same thing as rational persuasion. Determinism would disallow a basic philosophical presupposition: that our beliefs should be arrived at on the basis of a decision regarding the quality of the evidence and argumentation. On these grounds hard determinism fails.

More telling still is to attack the determinist on their own ground of the power of science. Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001) argued<sup>15</sup> that it is one thing to say that



event B is *caused* by A, quite another to say that A *determines* that B must follow. The example she used is of a Geiger counter attached to a bomb and placed next to a radioactive source: when an alpha-particle strikes the counter, this triggers the bomb to explode. Now, of course, if the bomb goes off we can say this was caused by the alpha-particle. Her point is different. She says that when the thing is first rigged up, we cannot determine *when* the bomb will go off, or even *if* the bomb will go off at all. The reason why this cannot be determined is that the law of nature concerning radioactivity is probabilistic - whether an alpha-particle gets emitted is predictable (given the half-life of the radioactive source) but only in terms of probability. This is like coin-tossing - we

cannot predict whether the next one will be heads or tails but we know that, with enough tosses, the ratio of heads to tails will be 50:50.

She then goes on to point out that the law of nature governing radioactivity is not special: all fundamental particles obey quantum mechanics, and the laws of quantum mechanics are probabilistic. Indeed, their probabilistic nature is entirely ineliminable - that is the way particles are. And, since the entire physical universe consists of such particles and their interactions, all laws of nature must be probabilistic. Hence, Anscombe concludes, nothing is determined even in the 'hard science' explanations of things and thus determinism is an unhelpful concept when we consider people's actions even if we favour the naturalistic approach to the human condition.

### **Determinism yes, free will yes**

The claim that determinism and free will are compatible is generally referred to as 'soft determinism'. It bases the claim on the distinction between free actions and unfree ones. Free actions are ones for which there is no constraint or coercion. Thus, if I want to close my eyes then, unless something is physically stopping me, or someone is telling me not to under pain of death, I am free to close them.

But is this an advance? What if I had been hypnotised or brain-washed into closing my eyes whenever the word 'utilitarianism' was uttered? I might think the action was a free one but, in fact, it would not

<sup>15</sup> in her paper 'Causality and Determination'



be. Just so, would say the hard determinist - there is no such thing as free will. 'Soft determinism' collapses back into 'hard determinism' and offers no separate solution.

### Determinism no, free will yes

To sustain this position, we need to identify free will with indeterminism (where there is an absence of causal determination). One possibility is to anchor it to the indeterminacy found at the quantum level of subatomic particles. This is not very attractive since it substitutes randomness for determinacy. Thinking of our behaviour as being the result of merely random processes still disallows ethics, for instance.

A second possibility is to account for our actions as being the result of our volitions. We have a desire to close our eyes and a volition arbitrates between the ensuing action or lack of it. But how can I 'summon up' a volition? Again, either the volition is determined or it is random. If the volition is physical then it is determined in some way. And if the volition has some non-physical aspect, how can it causally affect the physical world<sup>16</sup>?

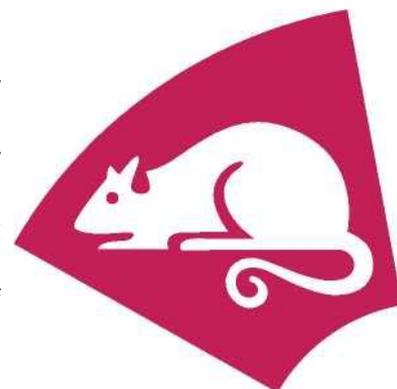
### Freedom and Responsibility

When philosophers reach an impasse such as we seem to have done with regard to the problem of freedom v. determinism where all the options seem not to be wholly convincing, then they are encouraged to try a different approach. Instead of concentrating solely on causal laws, for instance, perhaps we should address what it means for us to be free in the real world.

When looked at this way, free acts seem always to be bound up with the concept of *responsibility*. So, for example, if a driver kills a pedestrian it is not so much the question of the *cause* of the death that concerns us, but also the extent of the responsibility that we can attribute to the driver's actions. The cause of the death might simply be traced to the impact of fast-moving metal on flesh. This is not what is important. What we want to know is how responsible we can hold the driver to be for the death. If the pedestrian had been crouching behind a parked car and then, at the last moment, suicidally leapt in front of our driver, we might not hold him responsible. But even in these circumstances, if the driver had been speeding, or drinking, or trying to read a map, then we might start to say he *was* responsible to some extent. But again, even if he had been drinking, if this was because his wife had just left him, we might alter our assessment of his responsibility to a lesser value.

And so on.

The point here is that what is central to our assessment of the actions of humans is the degree of responsibility that can be apportioned to the individual. Not only that, we can then praise or blame the individual according to their degree of responsibility. And, if they've done something wrong, they can acknowledge their faults and we might forgive them. This sequence of judging responsibility, blaming (or praising), seeking forgiveness, forgiving can be argued to be central to our human nature. Not only that, it has its own logic: people tend to agree on the degree of responsibility, amount of praise/blame, when it is right to excuse a wrong-doer. Notice that this contrasts with our interactions with non-humans. If a rat habitually eats a farmer's stored corn, the farmer is not going to treat the rat like a human thief. If a human were to steal the corn, the farmer might hold that person responsible, but on finding out that the person is stealing because they are destitute



<sup>16</sup> See notes on the problems of dualism



with a hungry family and are sorry but had no other option, might forgive the theft, excuse the thief - might even end up being a friend. The rat just gets poisoned. The reason being that these sort of interpersonal relationships between humans are just not the same sort of relationships that exist between humans

Thus, when we look at human actions that affect other humans, there are two attitudes at work. The first is to treat the human in the same way as any other object i.e. as a natural object. This treatment is then amenable to scientific explanations. The second is to treat the human as a person and here the explanations will be in terms of responsibility, apportioning praise or blame, the possibility of excusing the action. What underpins this latter sort of explanation is rationality: we assume people are rational and are open to reasoning about rights and duties. This reasoning is also *effective* - it brings about a change in behaviour, it causes people to modify their behaviour in future.

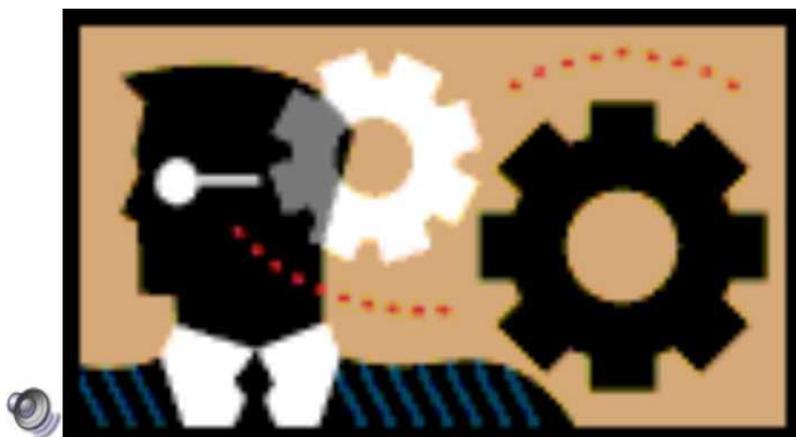
One way to see how this approach on the interpersonal level is more important in the real world when compared to the scientific approach is to consider a murderer who has killed an innocent man with red hair. What we think is crucial is to find out the reason for the killing because then we know how to treat the murderer. If that murderer had witnessed his mother being killed by a red-haired man who looked just like his victim whilst a child, we might find him less responsible. Especially if the murderer acknowledged he had been hasty, had been at fault, was truly sorry. We might then excuse his killing to some extent.

But what if this murderer refused to accept his actions as wrong? Showed no contrition? We would then be forced to the other, the scientific sort of explanation - looking for some sort of link between the stimulus of red-haired males on the release of pathological behaviour which might then be treated with surgery or drugs, for example. As you can see, this is a 'last resort' type of explanation: what we want in the real world are explanations that are not scientific in this way, but ones which satisfy the rationality of responsibility.

I dare say that you will have noticed that this is precisely the idea that Kant uses in his discussion of ethics. We know we are free because we are bound by the moral law: we are self-commanded by reason to do what we ought and avoid doing what we ought not. It makes no sense for such commands to be obeyed in the same way that our reflexes are obedient because reflexes are not duties: obeying or disobeying a duty *requires* us to have the freedom to choose. Kant taught that there is no reconciling the fact of our nature as physical beings and the fact of our freedom: the two ideas have to be transcended. In other words, humans consist in a sort of duality (in the sense of a coin having two sides - the sides are inseparable, one could not have one side alone) and a complete description of our world will always have two rival viewpoints. One of these will involve the deterministic, scientific viewpoint; the second the reasoning involved in duty and responsibility and other interpersonal concepts.

This interpretation is also compatible with existential interpretations of our nature.

We are not simply part of nature, swept along by its laws. We can judge nature, question our place in nature, act to change nature both externally and 'from within'.





## The Human Being

What we'll focus on now are the philosophical questions arising from a consideration of you as a *person*. Naturally, there will be a good deal of overlap with what we've been looking at already with respect to the human condition, but the ideas in this section are centred much more closely on the individual rather than on how individuals interact and live out their lives.

### Concepts of 'Self

The term 'self' is generally used as an equivalent of 'person'. A difference is that 'self' is usually used when there is more emphasis on the psychological rather than the physical aspects of an individual. Crucially, a 'self' has the capacity for *selfconsciousness*. Not just being conscious of the world (as many other animals are), but also being conscious of one's own consciousness. When we have a thought like 'I am reading at the moment', the 'I' of the thought seems to be referring to our 'self'. The possible status of this 'self', and whether it can be identified with other terms like 'mind', 'body' or 'soul' will be considered below.

#### a) The self as a substance

Descartes identified the mind with the self (and the soul) and was committed to the idea that there are two sorts of substance that exist in the world and hence he is known as a *substance dualist*. The notion of what he took to be a 'substance' needs clarification here for us to see why there are very few substance dualists left in the world.



Descartes adopted Aristotle's definition of substance. The notion is that a substance is the stuff to which properties are attached. Properties include things like shape, hardness, colour, taste, etc. Thus a chair will have certain properties: hard, wooden, 4-legged, brown, and so on. Now properties can change but it is clear that they cannot exist all by themselves: take an old, brown chair - the property 'old' cannot exist all by itself (without the chair or anything else), and neither can the property of 'brownness'. Thus, a property like 'old' must be attached to something if it is to have meaning. Now, since we know that properties can change, and since we also know that there is something *permanent* about a thing like a chair, it seems that this 'something' cannot be a property i.e. it is essential to existence. This propertyless something, to which properties belong, Aristotle called a substance.

Descartes regarded the essential substance of material things to be extension (occupying a certain amount of space). Nonmaterial things like perceptions, thoughts, ideas, feelings are all properties of the mind. He thought these properties are experienced by an underlying mental substance which is essential to have such mental activity: the self/mind/soul.

Descartes' preoccupation with substance as a thing has been considered a mistake for two main reasons. Firstly, we never encounter (physically or mentally) substances without their accompanying properties (see Hume below). So, for example, when we apprehend an apple, we do not apprehend it as the total sum of its properties (it weighs 30g, it's red and green, it's roundish, etc.). Rather, we assign it whole to the category 'apple'. Questions of what is left after taking away mass, colour, shape, etc. are mistaken since this is not how the object is conceived in the first place.

The second reason is that we can easily have objects with properties which clearly do not attach to a substance but such objects do have existential status. An example would be *the Fiat Uno*. Notice that there are lots of 'a Fiat Unos' but these are just examples of *the Fiat Uno*. A car critic can talk about the top speed, engine capacity, streamlining, acceleration, shape, etc., etc., of the Fiat Uno. But it would be



absurd to ask him to *show you* the Fiat Uno. *The* Fiat Uno does not exist except as examples/drawings/specifications/thoughts. In other words, there is no substance but there are properties of the car. Thus, the pressing logic which seemed to demand the existence of substance as a bedrock on which properties reside is an unnecessary complication (since there is no way of discovering such a substance empirically, and rationality does not find it a necessary condition).

### b) The self as immortal

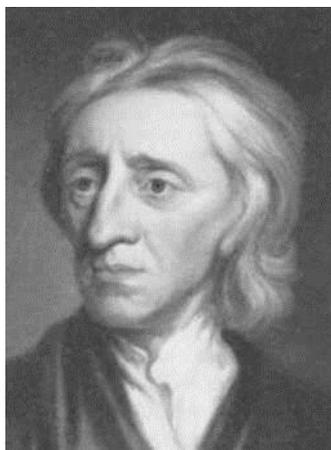
The Scottish 'common-sense' philosopher Thomas Reid (1710-96) argued that the self was *simple* rather than composite (i.e. made up of separable parts). He said that you could not have a part of a self - no matter how many bits are lopped off a (composite) human being, their self stays whole; no matter how many different experiences that occur through one's life, one's self stays the same. Thus he claimed that the self endures. The simple nature of the self opens the door to immortality following this argument:

1. All change and decay is the coming together or falling apart of composite things.
2. So, anything not composite cannot change and decay.
3. The self is not composite.

Therefore, the self cannot change or decay - it is immortal.

Initially, the first two parts of the argument might look a bit shaky but, if you think of the law of conservation of energy, they may well pass muster: the changes that occur in the physical universe are rearrangements of matter/energy and what is always conserved (immortally) is the amount of matter/energy. Later on we will take issue with the third part of the argument but, for now, what might make Reid's view on the immortality of the self less attractive is that it also works for the self existing *before* one's own natural birth. And, since we are unaware of ourselves pre-birth, we might have to conclude that we will be similarly unaware of ourselves post-death - which makes the prospect of immortality both less appealing and less important to us.

Reid argued that the self endures and this does have a common sense appeal: there is something about us that must stay the same otherwise we could not sensibly be said to be the same as we were yesterday or 10 years ago. Locke (1632-1704) had already pointed out that this 'something' that stays the same is



not *physically* the same. His example was an oak tree - it is the same tree even though its component cells are changing continuously. He said that what makes something the same (i.e. something that endures) is a *unity of function*. The tree goes on being the tree even though the bits that make it up come and go.

Now, given that human bodies are like trees, constantly altering in our physical make-up, if the thing that endures to make us the same person is not the *physical* stuff from which we are constituted, then perhaps our selves are nonphysical? Again, this idea opens the door to some sort of survival of self beyond physical dissolution - as a 'soul' in other words. Acutely, Locke points out that if we are concerned with our selves' survival beyond bodily survival that this idea of a non-physical self does not really help. The reason for this is that we are happy to identify a tree as the same tree despite the fact that it may have interchanged





physical bits with the rest of the world - but have we any justification for believing that whatever the 'self' is is not like the tree? Locke could see no justification for claiming that the self is not undergoing a constant turnover like the bits of the tree - so firmly closing the door to immortality that seemed to have opened.

### c) The self as continuity of consciousness

Having shown that appealing to the non-physical as a solution to what constitutes the self is seemingly hopeless, Locke offers something else. He said that what identifies us as the same self as yesterday and 10 years ago is our consciousness of our experiences over time.

This idea looks attractive because it rules out a *changing* of the self (soul). I really couldn't be a reincarnation of Shakespeare since I am not conscious of having done and felt the things he did: a clearing of all memory clears any continuity. On the other hand, it does have the consequence that if I totally lost my memory, I would no longer be me. Who, then, would I be if not Tony Stuart? Even if I lost a *bit* of my memory, there is still a problem. If I murder someone but, in the act, am caused to forget having done it, it seems to follow from Locke's idea that I am not the person who committed the murder. This seems very unsatisfactory: I am the same human being but not the self-same person. We can get rid of this difficulty if we identify the same person with the same physical human being (considered as having unity of function). If we do this, then the possibility of a self surviving beyond this physical being disappears. It also allows us to talk of persons being responsible for those things that they have done in the past (so long as they remember them).

### d) The self as unreal

David Hume (1711-76) said that there was nothing to the 'self, that it was unobservable:

*For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception.*

In other words, when we try to catch a glimpse of our 'selves', we never can: all we 'see' are particular perceptions, or experiences, or emotions: there is never an 'I' that is the subject of these. Hume thought that if you could not experience something, then it was silly to talk of it. Consistent with this, he held that the 'self so-called was merely a bundle of experiences together with whatever connections there were between them. In short, there was no *container* for these, no independent 'self': take away experiences and there is nothing left.





### e) The self as the subject of experiences I



Kant (1724-1804) objected to Hume's analysis. He said that this is to treat experiences as if they are objects just lying around waiting to be bundled up - like sticks on a woodland floor waiting to be gathered. Experiences cannot be like that because they *require* something to do the experiencing. Kant said that experiences were not things like sticks but things like craters on the Moon. A crater can be large or small, round or elliptical; it can grow or decay over time. We can talk easily about a crater without referring to the surface of the Moon. That said, it is nonsense to think of a crater as existing *independent* of the surface of the Moon. In just the same way, experiences are *adjectival* on one's self: a pain, for example, is adjectival on a self like a crater is formed in the surface of the Moon. Kant expresses this point by talking of the 'I

think' that goes along with all one's experiences: they all come labelled 'mine'. I do not experience pain and then look around to see if it belongs to me: to feel a pain is to know that I am in pain.

Even Kant's analysis is not the final word here. True, we know that craters cannot exist without a surface in which they are formed. But whereas we *do* know that there are such things as surfaces, as Hume says, we are *never* aware of the 'self to which experiences are supposed to be attached. Thus, we cannot make use of this analogy.

### f) The self as a merely convenient term



Wittgenstein (1889-1951) proposed a solution - the 'self just is not the sort of thing about which one can be said to have knowledge. His argument goes like this. Firstly, in our language all meaningful propositions must have a negation that is also meaningful. Thus, 'It is raining' is meaningful, as is its negation 'It is not raining'. If propositions do not conform to this rule, then they are meaningless propositions (meaningless in the sense that there can be no adequate explanation of them). He then went on to point out that when we refer to ourselves

it *seems* as though we are being meaningful but that this is an illusion. When I say 'I know that I am in pain' this sounds like I am referring the pain to my 'self' - just as when I say 'I know that you are in pain' I am referring the pain to you as a person. But, he says, it is nonsense to say 'I do not know that I am in pain' (the negation of 'I know that I am in pain'): there is *no possibility* of being mistaken about one's own experiences. When we use the term 'know' about our 'selves' we are deluded because it seems as if we are referring to something that is bodiless but, nonetheless, has a seat in our bodies. In other words, 'self' is a convenient word in our language, but to think that one could ever know anything about it is an illusion.



### g) The self as the subject of experiences II

If Wittgenstein is right in his argument (and most would accept that he is right) then we ought to try explaining self not as an entity but as something else. One of the most interesting ideas in philosophy may provide us with a key. It is Kant's analysis of what it must mean to have experience at all.

A simple way to approach his idea is by way of thinking of how we might build a robot that could replicate some part of our behaviour - describing the objects in a room, for example. The first thing the robot needs is some sort of camera wired up to its computer. This will give it information about what is in the room. The next step is to ask what must happen to this information in the computer. Clearly, somehow the computer has to *organise* the information. For example, imagine that in the picture of the room sent from camera to computer is a small round shape. Is this small because it is small but near; or is it small because it is larger but further away? Is it round because it is actually round, or is it an oval seen from a particular angle? The way to solve these problems is to get the robot to move to a different place in the room then point the camera at the shape again. Now all the computer has to do is this: it needs to know how much it has moved; it needs a memory to store the views it has taken; it needs to be able to put its views in the right time sequence; it needs to be able to integrate the two views.



The simplest way for the computer to achieve this appreciation of the size and position of objects in a room is to solve for *its own point of view*. Rather than, say, measuring distances from some external point (the corner of the room?) to the objects, it measures from its own position to the objects, moves for a registered time interval to a second position, then re-measures from itself to the objects, and finally solves the necessary geometry. (Notice why it cannot use 'the corner of the room' or any other 'external' position: it does not know where, exactly, these might be with reference to the other objects in the room so making measurement impossible.)

So, the robot-programmer's easiest solution is to get the robot's computer to keep referring objects around it to 'itself'. This gives the robot an 'egocentric' point of view with the objects presented as being centred on 'itself'. Not only could it say 'there is a ball in the room', it could also say 'the ball is two metres away from *me*'. The robot saying 'me' need have no clue about how its camera, or its computer, work. Nor need it know anything about what it looks like, or what it was in the past, or may be in the future.

Of course, for the robot to be able to *integrate* its views of the room, it must have a computer that is programmed to be able to 'solve for' the successive views the robot sees. Putting it in a room where objects blinked in and out of existence, or moved incredibly fast from one place to another, would give it no continuity for any integration to work on.

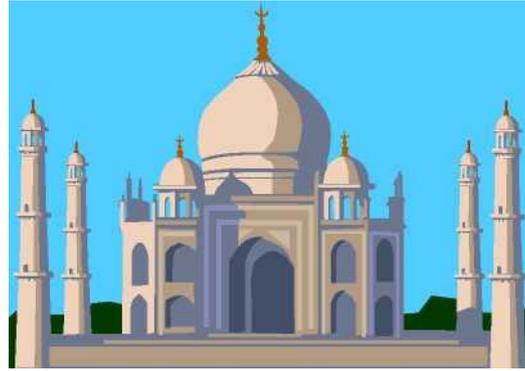
Thus, the self (the 'I' in our experience) could simply be a structural requirement for interpreting experience the way we do - as experience of a three-dimensional world of continuing objects amongst which we move. Self is a necessary reference point to make the world intelligible and not some other thing that we can experience since our experience can only be solved from our point of view. Kant's great idea is that our minds are structured to experience the world from one point of view, and 'programmed' to assign positions in space and time to those experiences.

Notice that just because our usual point of view is centred on our own bodies, this is not always the only point of view we can adopt. Once I have experienced a ball next to a chair in the room, I can change my point of view to experience the chair from the ball's 'point of view'. There is no transfer of some 'self-substance' to the ball, simply an exercise of the imagination on my part. Thus, arguments based on the self as a substance (such as Descartes made) cannot be supported by our imagining ourselves as separable from our body.



## h) The self in Hinduism Introduction

'Hinduism' is the way the West has referred to the various religious and philosophical ideas that can be identified with Southern Asia. It would be misleading to think of it as being anything other than a convenient term for geographical origins: there is no common text, philosophy, nor any common set of beliefs to 'Hinduism'.



That said, there is a group of texts called the Upanishads which have played an important role throughout Hindu religious history. Upanishad literally means 'sit near' but has become 'esoteric teaching'. The earliest Upanishads were put together in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC and consist of collections of conversations between students and teachers. They represent secret lessons passed on to groups of close disciples by forest-dwelling meditation masters. The oldest and largest is the Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad ('The Great and Secret Teachings of the Forest') which from now on I'll abbreviate to BAU.

### **Brahman**

One core tenet of all the Upanishads is the belief that everything is interconnected: the apparent multiplicity of the world can be revealed as ultimately being one interconnected unity. In the BAU, the great sage Yajnavakya reveals (to a female philosopher, Gargi) that the ultimate reality and absolute ground for all being is *brahman*. This is both immanent and transcendent: *in* the world but not *of* the world. *Brahman* is beyond what we experience with our senses (it is 'not this, not that' – *neti neti*) while, at the same time, certain passages in the book identify it with anything we experience (he is made of this, he is made of that'). I'll say more about this apparent inconsistency and how it is interpreted below.

### **Atman and Ahamkara**

The interconnectedness of all things naturally includes all human beings. It is recognised that humans have a 'self' but how is this connected to *brahman*? Well, most of us ignorant humans think of our self as being identified with our body and our social environment. We imbue this self with great meaning and importance and do our best to preserve it. This self as an ego is referred to as *ahamkara*. But it is not the essential self - it cannot be because the ego is transitory and separate from other things whereas all things are one. Hence, there is an essential self - *atman* - which is not separate from *brahman*. *Atman* transcends individuality and bodily limitations such as suffering and death. The primary aim in the Upanishads is to bring about a shift in identity from the normal emphasis on the transient ego (*ahamkara*) to the eternal and infinite self (*atman*): to realise that *atman* is *brahman*.

Many benighted people (like us?) fail to grasp the idea of *brahman* and remain wedded to *ahamkara* and the transitory world of change: we do not know ourselves truly. While in reality we are at one with the world, we spend our lives overwhelmed by the limited projects of our ego. Of necessity, then, we experience alienation, separation from others, from the source of life, from our true self, from the One.

### **Karma**

The part of our self that is most closely identified with the multiplicities of the world *ahamkara* - is conditioned and determined. In the BAU the conditioning factors are identified as *karma*. Our intentions are determined: we are psychologically programmed with our desires stemming from our unconscious mind. This psychological bondage can be broken, however, through yoga and meditation.



## Reincarnation

Since *atman* is eternal, there are two possible paths (as outlined in the BAU) that it may take when separated from its incarnated form (currently in a human being, say). The first is reincarnation: you die, are cremated, pass into smoke (if the correct



religious rites are observed), pass into night, join the world of ancestors, go to the moon, become rain, fall back to Earth, pass into food, enter a man, 'are offered in the fire of a woman', and get reborn. The second (superior) journey is taken by the *atman* of the masters who have achieved the highest knowledge: they die, are cremated, pass into flames, pass into day, join the world of gods, enter the Sun, pass into the world of *brahman*. This is called *moksha* - the liberation from the cycle of life and death.

## Shankara and the illusion of God

One of the best-known Hindu philosophers is Shankara (788-820) and, as we shall see, produced a view of the world that is strikingly similar to that of the great Immanuel Kant.



Shankara taught that *brahman* is the only truth; that the world is ultimately unreal; that both God and the individual soul are illusions. He arrived at these conclusions after realising that all appearances of things must be false. This is because the way that we as individuals apprehend the world around us is through our senses which force onto this world an appearance of individuality and multiplicity - whereas we *know* that the world is One. He called this process of illusion *maya* and regarded it as the major obstacle to ultimate knowledge.

Ultimate knowledge requires us to transcend our sensual perceptions of the world.

His stock example is a snake and a rope. In poor light a person can mistake a rope for a snake: his fear is a real, existential, fear. However, when the light of knowledge illuminates the 'snake', it is seen for what it truly is. Analogously, the world of appearance is superimposed on the world of reality, *brahman*.

(Kant had other terms for the same insight. He referred to the world of appearances, the world as delivered to us by our senses, as the phenomenal world. The real world behind this world of appearances, a world that is beyond us but which we know must be there, as the noumenal world.)

Shankara went on to infer that a personal God is an illusion. This is because if anything has attributes, then this must be a product of *maya* since attributes are the qualities by which we perceive things in the world. A personal God necessarily has attributes, and hence this concept is illusory. However, enmeshed as we are in the cosmic illusion of *maya*, the concept of a personal God is probably as close as most of us will ever get to true knowledge and hence this God should be worshipped as the necessary transition between the world and appreciation of *brahman*.

(Kant also advocated belief in God - largely because he had concluded that Reason governs both the phenomenal world and the noumenal world and that Reason dictates that the unfairnesses and injustices of this world require setting right in another world by a benevolent God.)



Finally, for Shankara the individual soul ('*jiva*') is pure consciousness (identified with *atman*). It *appears* to be associated with the worldly self, but this is an illusion. It is eternally free from *karma*; beyond experience and hence cannot be spoken of. The goal of all spiritual endeavour is to realise this ultimate fact. The path to it is to renounce all desire - since the BAU states that it is desire that was what led the original, unity of *brahman* to become diverse.

### Ramanuja and the reality of God

The diversity of 'Hinduism' becomes clear when we see that Ramanuja (1017-1137) opposed most of Shankara's ideas. It is currently true to say that Ramanuja is by far the more popular of the two, with his teachings of the reality of the world and the reality of a personal God (identified with Lord Vishnu) not being illusory in the least.

Briefly, Ramanuja claimed that *brahman* without qualities (*nirguna*) is not supreme as Shankara would have it. He said that *brahman* with qualities (*saguna*) was the higher form. He argued that this must be the case because the only way that *brahman* is known to us at all is because it has qualities that we can know. In other words, it is differentiated and has attributes. Not only that, the world itself is real since it resulted from God's wish to become manifold. This reality of the world is what we must seek to truly appreciate. *Maya* is not a illusionary trap, it is the power God has given us to make his world appreciated. *Jiva* (the individual soul) is real, a part of *brahman* and a special enjoyer of experience which, in its highest state is the eternal, blissful knower of *brahman*.



#### i)      h) The self as an enduring concept

Although 'self' might really only be a point of view that is necessary to experience, this doesn't make it any less important to us psychologically. For some reason, we deeply care about our own future.

Imagine if humans could be sedated and then parts of them scrambled together before being reanimated. If this were to happen to you tomorrow with parts of your brain and body (plus the complementary parts) going as person X to a beach in the Bahamas, the rest (plus complement) going as person Y sewage-sifting in Slough, wouldn't you really want to know where 'you' would be: the Bahamas, or Slough, or Z dead? There would be no 'you' experiencing both Bahamas and Slough since you can have just one point of view at a time. If you are like me, you would want to know - as a matter of urgency - which of the three options would be 'you'.

Notice that this urgency about our future doesn't apply to the past. Imagine you discovered that you were a synthesis of two people, one of whom spent last New Year's Eve at a party, the other who spent it in bed. Neither of these people now exists, of course, but wondering about what you did last New Year's Eve would just seem pretty idle speculation - not the sort of life-or-death speculation about the future outlined above. (One rather chilling aspect of this thought-experiment is to fast-



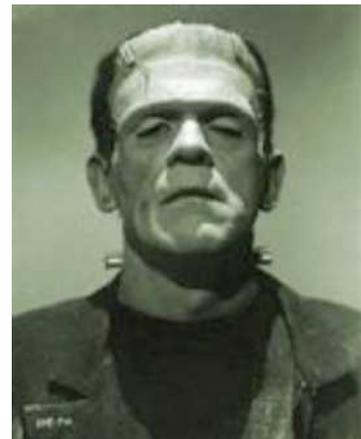
forward to X lying on the beach in the Bahamas. Ask him (or her according to taste) if he is very much interested in the two people he has been assembled from. He will probably not care much at all, just as we wouldn't care much about the New Year's Eve people.)

Although the enduring self may be an illusion, it is difficult (if not impossible) to abandon it as a concept. Even if someone offered you the chance of having your brain washed clear of all your thoughts, feelings, experiences and memories, then restocked with those of someone else you admire or aspire to be (real or ideal), would you want to accept it? If you are convinced that the self is a mere illusion, agreeing shouldn't matter to you one little bit. I think that most (if not all) of us would not submit to any such change - which shows how powerful a grip the idea of self has in our thinking.

### The self: knowing me, knowing you

Famously, Descartes discovered that he could be certain that he existed as a 'thinking thing' because it is impossible to doubt *cogito ergo sum* - if you are having a thought (even if the thought is a doubt) then you must exist to have the thought. You'll remember from the first section that he, as a substance dualist, regarded this thinking thing as his substantial self. On the way to establishing this truth, he argues that we can have no certainty about anything that we think comes in from our senses (including that we have physical bodies, that other things such as people and the rest of the physical world). In other words, he argues that *empiricism* does not deliver knowledge and that *rationalism* is the key to knowing anything and everything.

Once Descartes has established that he can be certain of his own existence as a 'thinking thing', he moves on to prove that, in fact, his body, other people, and the physical world do, in fact, exist and that we can know such things. At the heart of his argument is his contention that we can know our own mind. This is generally called 'first-person privilege': I know what I'm thinking/feeling but no-one else can know this. But this also raises the problem of how can I know what you are thinking/feeling? Are you thinking/feeling at all in the same way that I do? Might you be a zombie (an unconscious animated being)?



Descartes' route to establishing the existence of the world beyond his own mind/self was to prove the existence of a good God. If this good God did not exist, then there might be no escape from the 'first-person' position: all we can know with certainty is our own self. (In a while, we'll look at this possibility when we turn to solipsism.) But first we can have a look at how Wittgenstein argued against Descartes' assertion that one can 'know' one's own mind in this privileged way. It is generally referred to as the 'Private Language Argument'.

Wittgenstein argued that, *contra* Descartes, one cannot be certain of one's own thoughts. This is a rather startling claim since it seems that the world divides very neatly into two: the subjective world of one's own thoughts that cannot be known to others; the objective world on which different people can (objectively) agree.

Descartes' theory is that our mental states are *private* and hence can be known only to the person experiencing those mental states. Thus, only I can *know* if I am in pain or not - you could never have the same certainty about my pain that I have. In other words, our mental states are separate from the *public* world of objective knowledge that is accessible to all. Wittgenstein argued that this was all wrong, that mental states such as pain could not be private things at all. We'll examine how he comes to this very non-common-sensical interpretation now.

His first move is to clarify what is meant by the term 'mental state'. Let us take the mental state of 'pain' as an example, he says. How do we identify the mental state of pain? Of course, there are obvious criteria



which we can use to identify it in other people: they are grimacing, howling, telling us they are in pain. But how do I tell that *I* am in pain? Here there is no similar criterion which I use to identify pain - there is no question of my having to make any sort of *judgment* as I would have to in the case of your pain: I know my own pain without any judgment at all. The question Wittgenstein asks is 'Why is it that I have no criteria for identifying my own mental states such as pain?'



To answer this, he turns to language. He points out that mental states are identified by words in our public language. Thus 'pain' means something particular in our language and the fact that the language is public (shared) means that 'pain' is understood to have this particular meaning. So, for instance, if I said 'I folded up a sheet of pain earlier' you would know that I did not understand what 'pain' meant, that I have misidentified it. Similarly, if I said 'I think I might be in pain but I'll just check in the mirror to see if I am grimacing and then I'll know for sure' you would again know that something has gone wrong with my understanding of 'pain'. Considering these things tells us something, Wittgenstein says. What it tells us that the fact that our mental states (such as 'pain')

are used in a public language, and are identified as being true or not through public observation (and possible correction) of language use, then they cannot be private at all. Here is section 293 from his book *Philosophical Investigations* that puts his position best:

**If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word 'pain' means - must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalise the *one* case so irresponsibly<sup>17</sup>?**

**Now someone tells me that *he* knows what pain is only from his own case! Suppose everyone has a box with something in it: we call it a 'beetle'. No one can look in anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. But suppose the word 'beetle' had a use in these people's language? If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something* for the box might even be empty. No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box: it cancels out, whatever it is.**

In a nutshell, you can never introduce into a public language a word that refers to a private object. Just suppose that what I have in my box is a sugar cube which I call a 'beetle'. If Descartes' theory is right, then I cannot be wrong since I, and I alone, can know what is in my mind ('box'). And if you think Descartes is right, you will have to agree that only I can know what is in my mind ('box'). But if I tell you that I use a beetle to sweeten my tea you will know that I am wrong, that I *do not know* what this particular thing in my mind is at all: my (faulty) public language use has demonstrated that. Because we *do* know what mental states such as 'pain' mean, then they are not 'private objects' at all since these do not have a meaning.

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<sup>17</sup> This is pointing out that arguing from analogy is wildly implausible. I know from one case (my own) that a mind is like this, but just because other people look similar to me this is no justification that they too have minds which are similar to mine. One dumb blonde does not mean all blondes are dumb.



It is worth pointing out here that Wittgenstein was committed to the idea that all philosophical problems are language problems. He acknowledged that these problems were very knotty, but said that all that was required was some patience, ingenuity and application and the knotted strands of language could be



disentangled to reveal the underlying straight-forwardness of things. Thus, as we have seen, Descartes' analysis of mind leads to the immediate problem of how you could know whether there were any other minds around. If everyone's mind is wholly private, this looks impossible. Wittgenstein's analysis dissolves the problem of other minds existing as well as our own: the fact that we have a meaningful public language guarantees there are minds as well as ours in the world.

As mentioned above, Wittgenstein finds a clue to dissolving the problem in the 'criterion of identity' we use to distinguish one thing from another. As we have seen, there is no such criterion for one's own pain. The language trap we have fallen into is thinking that 'my pain' is like 'my briefcase' - something that is easily identified as belonging to me. But imagine I am one of those benighted commuters who catches the 7.22 to London every weekday morning. I might well refer to the 7.22 as 'my train' - as in 'my train was rather dirty, noisy and late today'. But what is it about the train which I am using to identify it as 'mine'? It cannot be the engine and carriages since these are almost certainly different everyday. Nor can it be the other people on the train since these too are variable. This leaves nothing physical. What identifies it as 'my' train is merely the fact that I catch it every weekday. Other commuters regularly catching the 7.22 could also be referring to it as 'their' train. Thus, 'my train' is nothing like 'my briefcase' (which is physically identifiable and which other commuters cannot call theirs). What I am referring to in 'my train' is, in fact, an objectively-shared, publicly-meaningful concept which, superficially at least, looked as if it belonged to me alone (like 'my briefcase'). 'My pain' is the same as 'my train' - there is nothing about it to identify it with me personally, but a lot that identifies it as a public entity (we all know about pains - we might even talk about having the *same* pain).

In conclusion to all this, the fact that our language has meaning shows that any sensation we experience, and which we can correctly describe to others, must mean that our 'inner world' is not private. The implications of accepting Wittgenstein's analysis are far-reaching: to obtain knowledge it is important to step outside the subjective, first-person perspective. The fact that you share a language guarantees that other minds exist and that there is a 'public realm' in which you and others all exist.

Before leaving the 'self' we can look at a couple of other positions on the question. The first is **solipsism**; the second is **intersubjectivity**.

Solipsism is the position which you may well arrive if you start with your own thoughts in your own mind as being the only thing you can know for certain. Since you cannot know with the same degree of certainty that there is anything else in the world *apart from* these thoughts, you are not warranted in going beyond claiming that your thoughts are the only things which truly exist.

It is certainly possible that this is the case. In fact, it is certainly *impossible* to disprove the solipsist's claim - any 'evidence' or 'argument' that is produced in the solipsist's mind cannot be certainly said to have come from 'outside' it. The only line of attack is to point to its absurdity. If the solipsist is the only thing in the Universe, then the solipsist will have invented the Universe - including every work of art, every joke, every text-book, every new idea. Further, the solipsist is amoral (no other 'real' beings exist since they are mere figments of the solipsist's mind)

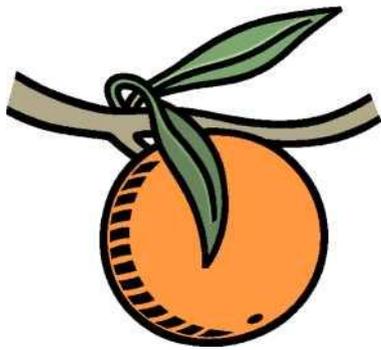




and can do whatever they like with their Universe. This seems so very implausible and undesirable that there are no identifiable solipsists around. [Though God may be a contender, of course?]

Intersubjectivity is another specialist term which requires a little background before you can appreciate what it means.

It derives from a particular analysis of what is crucial to being a mind: this being that thoughts we have (i.e. thoughts our minds have/are) are always related to oneself. Most immediately, for example, our sensations such as seeing red, feeling pain, knowing the taste of lemons, are all very subjective: only I can experience these 'from inside' and I will never know for sure that you (or any other mind) will



experience the same sensation. Also, our other (non-sensational) thoughts are also self-directed and hence subjective in that whatever we think of is thought of in relation to ourselves. Even if I wonder what she sees in him, for instance, (which seems at first sight not to be about me) includes the 'I wonder' element. In short, it is impossible to separate 'me' from 'my thoughts'. From this consideration, the 'mind' is too vague a term since it carries lots of other philosophical baggage with it. Instead, the term 'subjectivity' is used to refer to what we can think of as 'me-and-my-thoughts'.

Let's imagine that there is an orange on the table in the room where there are also several people. Why is it that we can all agree that there is an orange there? (Notice that this orange stands for anything and everything in the physical world.) What we are getting at here is how facts like oranges being on tables can be established given only that we are 'subjectivities'. Perhaps the best theory that explains this is that there is something about the orange that causes the 'subjectivities' to agree - despite their subjective point of view. What could this 'something' be? Since we cannot escape being subjective (the 'me' is always in my thoughts) then surely the closest that we can get to pure objectivity is when our subjectivities all agree, when they are all coherent and consistent. This 'something' is called *intersubjectivity* and refers to the status of being somehow accessible to two or more subjectivities - like our orange on the table.

Moving on, we can infer from the fact of our agreement about facts like oranges on tables, that there is some sort of link between our 'subjectivities' when we both have the orange in our individual minds. This link has a characteristic in that we can now know that there are other minds besides our own.

This all sounds very neat but there is a flaw - or at least the suspicion of a flaw - in this inference. "How are we to define 'intersubjectivity'?" a sceptic might innocently ask. We might point to the orange example above and say that when two or more people agree about the facts of the world (the presence of an orange in this example) then we have 'intersubjectivity'. But the sceptic might then go on to point out that this answer presupposes that there is, in fact, an orange in the room about which we then all agree. In other words, we are assuming that there is a world outside our minds in providing a definition to show that there is a world (including oranges and other minds) outside our minds. The sceptic shakes their head and sighs over our circular argument. But, like the argument against the solipsist, it may be the best we've got - and is to be preferred on the grounds of providing a better explanation than no explanation.

If we settle for intersubjectivity, then the implication is that our selves are *sustained* by others: I cannot know myself without there being others to give me my appreciation of 'my self'. It is the presence of others in my world which helps to define me as what I am. This is the idea underpinning the aphorism that you can know a man by his friends: one's self is shaped by others.



## Of Minds and Bodies

One of the characteristics that could be used to establish whether an organism counts as a human being might be having a mind. The sorts of minds that humans have appear to be hugely different from any sort of mind that other animals have. Such differences would include things like language, art, self-awareness, imagination, and many of the beliefs, hopes and desires that give us motivation for living.

There are three basic and philosophical questions we can ask about the mind. Firstly, can we know if there are other minds out there? Secondly, are our minds free to choose one course of action rather than another? Thirdly, are our minds quite distinct from our bodies? These are philosophical questions because they arise out of clashes between some of the common-sense assumptions we have in our everyday thinking. We have already considered ideas concerning the first two questions and it is to the third that we can now turn.

### Are our minds and bodies different?

There are two standpoints on this which both, on the surface, seem correct. The first is materialism. This answers the question with a 'No' because it is evident that humans are a part of the physical world, that their brains are physical, and that damaging the brain damages the mind. Thus, the mind is part of the physical world: mind and body are not different.

The second standpoint is dualism which answers 'Yes' to the question and so, since the answers contradict each other, provides us with the clash between two common-sense views. We'll look at dualism in detail first.

### Dualism

This is the belief that the mind and the body are quite distinct entities. The body is made of matter but the mind is not. This accords well with our common-sense view of the world.

When someone says: "*He's not interested in me, he's only interested in my body*" they are drawing a distinction between the 'me' on the one hand and 'my body' on the other.

In other words, it is quite natural for us to think of ourselves and our bodies as distinct and, indeed, be able to speak about such a distinction intelligibly to others. Similarly, we can easily imagine shifting our mind into someone else's body: we can think of ourselves in the body of, say, the Olympic 100m champion, or a pop star, or a Roman gladiator. This sort of fantasy could only be coherent if we thought of ourselves as somehow separable from our own bodies.

The idea of mind and body being distinct is quite compelling. It is particularly attractive in allowing for such things as the mind (or 'soul') being able to survive the death of the body, as well as accounting for free will rather than the determinism that materialism appears to entail. Hence, it would be with some reluctance that we should abandon dualism so let's look at some of the arguments in its favour.





## Arguments for Dualism

Given the general popularity of dualism (even if people who think this way have not given it much thought), you will often come across rather simplistic arguments which might support the position. Here are some together with counter-arguments:

“Mental properties (like being conscious, for example) are so different from physical properties (like weighing 100kg, for example) that they clearly cannot be had by the same thing: so the physical properties are had by the body and the mental ones by something else.”

We might grant (for the sake of argument) that mental properties really are radically different from physical properties. However, that does not necessarily imply that these properties are aspects of two things (‘minds’ and ‘bodies’) rather than just one. After all, the property of beauty and the property of being composed of paint both belong to just one thing (a painting by Vermeer, say). We might agree that ‘beauty’ and ‘paint’ are radically different but that doesn’t imply they must therefore belong to two things rather than the one work of art.

“Merely material things cannot think and feel. Obviously, we can think and feel. Hence we are not merely material objects, but something else besides.”

This is unconvincing to a materialist since the first premise is an assumption that they deny: ‘I am a material thing and I *can* think and feel!’. Simple material things like sticks and stones may be incapable of thought and sensation, this doesn’t mean that complex material things like humans can’t.

“A merely material being couldn’t appreciate *The Marriage of Figaro*, fall in love, believe in God, ... We evidently can do all these types of thing, ... So again it follows that we are not mere chunks of physical stuff but something else besides.”

Again, the materialist could point to himself as a counter-example. Appreciation of, for example, sublime music by a physical system is, granted, not easy to explain. However, it is no solution to ascribe it to a non-physical system (‘mind’) - in fact, it makes the problem even harder to solve.

One apparently stronger argument for dualism is the evidence that ‘mind’ can, in certain circumstances, be appreciated as being separate from ‘body’. Empirically, such evidence is provided by the phenomenon of ‘out-of-body’ experiences where a person ‘floats free’ from their body and observes that body from a different vantage point. The argument then runs:

1. *Out-of-body experiences have occurred.*
2. *Therefore, dualism is true.*

Tackling an argument philosophically can take the form of questioning the premise(s) of the argument (statement 1). Here, we might question if out-of-body experiences really have occurred. This involves a good deal of work - lots of empirical investigating of the so-called phenomena.

Another way is to question the logic of the argument: does accepting the premise(s) *force* us to accept the conclusion (statement 2)? In this case, is dualism the *only possible* way that the premise could be true? If not, then we don’t need to worry if the premises are true or not (and so remain in our armchair).

So, can we think of some explanation of the out-of-body experiences that does not appeal to a non-physical ‘mind’ that is separate from the body? Well, out-of-body experiences are *as if the experiencing mind is outside the body*. The key words are ‘as if’. *Appearances* of things are not the same as things themselves - they could be illusions or hallucinations, for instance. Given that the experience can be interpreted as an appearance, we are not forced to accept the conclusion that dualism is true.

Even if the dualist comes back saying that we have to allow appearances to coincide with reality at some stage otherwise no knowledge is possible, they would find it hard to explain how this separate ‘mind’ can see the body without the benefit of having eyes (which are still in the body over there) to see with. If a mind can see without eyes, then why cannot blind people see with their minds, for example? This shows



that, far from being a straightforward explanation of out-of-body experiences, the dualist explanation raises *more* difficulties.

It is time to move on to more substantial arguments in favour of the dualist position. This one is based on the way we use everyday language and tackles the materialist view head-on.

“According to the materialist view, there is nothing more to a person than that complex physical organism called their body. Thus, the term ‘Jack’ and ‘Jack’s body’ pick out one and the same thing. But this must be wrong because the two terms cannot be exchanged to preserve an identical meaning. ‘Jack is wonderful’ and ‘Jack’s body is wonderful’ do not mean the same thing. In fact the first could be true while the second one is false. Hence, the materialist alternative to dualism must be false.”

We must grant that ‘Jack’ and ‘Jack’s body’ are different (otherwise ‘Jack’s body’ could be ‘Jack’s body’s body’ ad infinitum). Further, we must grant that if two things were identical, they could substitute for each other without affecting the truth [they can be intersubstituted *salva veritate* i.e. without losing the truth].

This principle, known as Leibniz’s Law, is important enough to warrant further development.

There are two terms to distinguish. A *designator* picks out a particular thing e.g. a table, the hairy dog, the seventh President. Two designators are *co-referential* if they refer to the same thing - if ‘a is b’ is true where a and b are designators. Now suppose we have a pair of claims that ‘a is P’ and ‘b is P’ where P is some property. Now if a and b are co-referential they must either both be true or both be false (depending on whether they have the property or not). And conversely, if one is true and the other false, they cannot be co-referential. There are important exceptions to Leibniz’s Law and these will be considered in a short while.



Even granting Leibniz’s Law in this case, the dualist conclusion can still be resisted by arguing that ‘Jack’ and ‘Jack’s body’ do pick out the same thing. It is merely convention that the terms are used to emphasise one aspect of the single entity that is Jack rather than another. Thus, ‘Jack’s body is wonderful’ emphasises the corporeal aspects rather than other attributes such as his sincerity, loyalty, and so on.

‘Jack’s body’ is not a simple designator but a double one - picking out Jack and picking out an aspect, or property, of Jack. In this regard, ‘Jack’s body’ is not the same as ‘Jack’s house’ which is a simple designator



Further, even if our language is committed to dualism, this would not show dualism is true: our common-sense ways of thought and talk about the matter could be wrong.

### Descartes’ (throwaway) Argument

Descartes employed systematic doubt to uncover truths of which he could be certain. One truth he thinks he can establish is that of dualism. He makes the following argument but, to spare him his blushes, not in a really systematic way. (He produces a much better argument in his *Meditations* and we will give it due consideration there.)



*“In the next place, I attentively examined what I was, and as I observed that I could suppose that I had no body, and that there was no world nor any place in which I might be; but that I could not therefore suppose that I was not; and that, on the contrary, from the very circumstances that I thought to doubt the truth of other things, it must clearly and certainly follow that I was; while, on the other hand, if I had only ceased to think, although all the other objects which I had ever imagined had been in reality existent, I would have had no reason to believe that I existed; I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has no need of place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that “I”, that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter, and is such, that although the latter were not, it would still continue to be all that it is.”* **Discourse on Method, Part IV**

In short, Descartes argument can be summarised in the following way:

- a) *I can feign that my body does not exist,*
- b) *I cannot feign that I myself do not exist,*

Hence, c) *I myself am totally distinct from my body.*

Notice that a) is more subtle than the bold claim “I can imagine myself existing without a body”. The latter could be challenged on the grounds that imagining a bodyless mind is impossible. Descartes premise is merely claiming that we cannot defend our belief in the physical world (including the body) against the sceptic. Put this way, the premise seems secure. Also, for the reasons Descartes himself gives, the premise b) seems secure too.

But do the two premises together, even if they are true, compel us to accept the conclusion?

The reason why Descartes’ argument is invalid is because it belongs to a whole family of exceptions to Leibniz’ Law. Have a look at the following:

- a) Fred believes Cilla Black hosts Blind Date,
- b) Fred believes Priscilla White does not host Blind Date,

Hence, c) Cilla Black is not Priscilla White.

- d) Oedipus wants to marry Jocasta,
- e) Oedipus does not want to marry his mother,

Hence, f) Jocasta is not Oedipus’ mother.

According to Leibniz’ Law, two co-referential designators may be swapped *salva veritate* without making a difference to the truth or falsity of what is said. And if they cannot be swapped to do this, they do not designate the same thing. Clearly, conclusions c) and f) are wrong. It turns out that Leibniz’ law does not hold if the designators occur after what is called a *psychological verb* - such as ‘believes’, ‘wants’, ‘hopes’, ‘expects’. The reason for this is that after such verbs the designator no longer picks out something in the real world but something that is in a person’s mental world. And a person’s mental world may not match the real world (like not knowing Cilla Black and Priscilla White are the same person).

Descartes argument employs the psychological verb ‘feign’ and thus his contention that ‘I myself’ and ‘my body’ are not interchangeable, i.e. do not designate the same thing, is flawed.



Another way to show that the reasoning is flawed is by setting up a second argument with the same overall form but which is patently false. Consider the Head waking up one morning having been struck by amnesia. At some point she imagines she might be the Head of Sevenoaks School. Could this improbable thing be true? Following good Cartesian thinking, she sets aside all things she could doubt and this would have to include the idea that the Head of Sevenoaks School does not exist (it may have ceased to trade, for example). But she could not doubt that he existed. So, she reasons:

- a) *I can feign that the Head of Sevenoaks School does not exist,*
- b) *I cannot feign that I do not exist,*

Hence, c) *I myself am distinct from the Head of Sevenoaks School.*

This is clearly invalid since the conclusion is false while the premises are true. And since it has the same form as Descartes' argument, that too is invalid.

### Attacking the Dualist

So far, we have been looking at arguments that show the dualist cannot establish that minds and bodies are separate entities. (But note that this does not show that the dualist position is wrong. It could be that a perfect argument that *does* establish mind and body as separate entities is even now being produced.) In the meantime, are there arguments to show that the dualist position is mistaken?

Perhaps at the outset, there is a temptation is to dismiss dualism on the grounds that claiming the existence of non-physical objects is plain nonsense. This is not acceptable because the dualist can easily reply that just because science hasn't yet discovered a way of describing or defining non-physical things doesn't mean that there is not one to discover - particularly as the mind obviously does exist and is obviously not measurable by scientific means. Besides, there is no reason to suppose that there is nothing more to the world than physical objects and the physical forces (we know about) that influence them.

### The identity problem

A more difficult problem for the dualist to answer with confidence is that of the identity of the mind with a particular body. If 'mind' occupies no physical space, and if 'mind' can exist separately from 'body', then the dualist has two related questions to answer:

- i) how many minds are there in any one body?
- ii) is the mind in a particular body the same one as was in that body yesterday?

Obviously, for someone who says that the mind and the body (usually limited to the brain) are one and the same thing, these questions are really easy to answer: one brain, one mind; same brain, same mind. The dualist like Descartes, who can only 'know from within' that his mind exists cannot know that the body in which that mind finds itself is not simultaneously occupied by another one (or more) minds each of which thinks that it is the 'sole owner' as it were. Similarly, on waking up in a body in the morning, there is no persuasive reason that the dualist can offer to say that the two match those that were associated the previous day - if the mind can separate from the body, there seems to be nothing to stop it drifting into other bodies at other times.

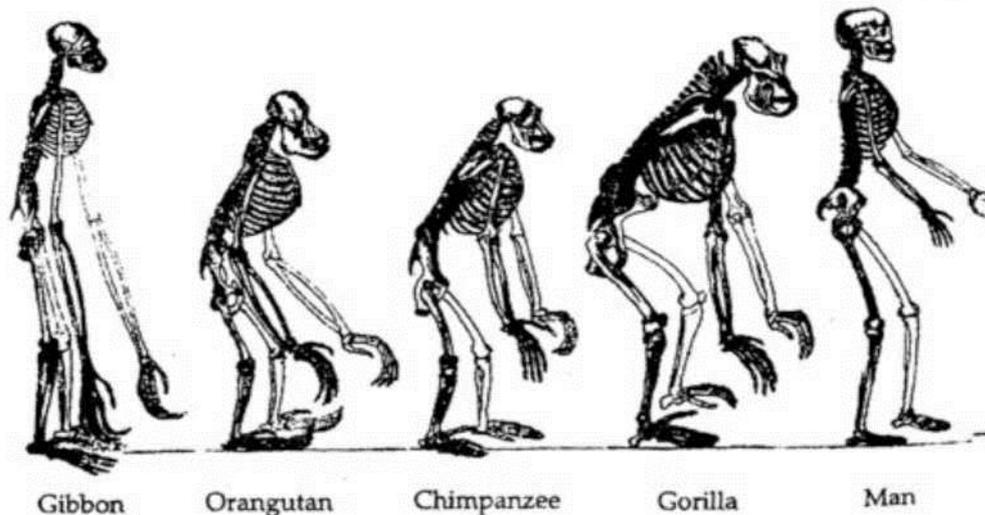




A possible reply is that 'one mind goes with one body by definition'. This is too weak because it is what the mind consists in that is at issue here. It cannot be so airily dismissed in this way.

### The evolutionary and developmental problem

When did/do minds get to become associated with bodies? This is another difficult question for the dualist to give a convincing reply to. Taking evolution first, it seems clear that bacteria and single-celled organisms cannot be said to have minds. Humans do have minds. Given these propositions, the problem is when minds appeared on Earth. What were minds doing before humans appeared?



Possible answers to this might be to dismiss evolution (which underpins biology) as false. This is as unattractive as dismissing Atomic Theory (which underpins chemistry) as false. Another might be to claim that there is a sort of mind evolution which runs parallel to body evolution. This is also unattractive because it just adds to the mystery (we have to find an explanation of 'mind evolution' that is as convincing as natural selection is for 'body evolution').

The developmental aspect of this question is to ask about when, during our development from a fertilised egg, each of us got a mind. Again, for someone claiming that mind and brain are one and the same, this is not a problem: the mind appears when the brain does.

### The causation problem

It seems clear that mental events can cause physical events, and that physical events can cause mental events. An example of the former is the desire to click your fingers (mental event) which then is enacted with the clicking of your fingers (physical event). An example of the latter is a hammer hitting your fingers (physical event) and the ensuing pain (mental event).

The philosophical problem here is how two things as different as mind (nonspatial, nonphysical) and body (existing in space, made of matter) can possibly affect each other?

The scientific problem the dualist faces is how can physical events be affected by immaterial causes? Postulating such an idea flies in the face of a fundamental principle of the physical sciences. The whole history (and success) of science has been based on the search for, and discovery of, physical causes for physical events. It is rational to stick with a method of discovery that has proved effective and productive. The dualist would have to reject the knowledge that physicists have of the laws governing the behaviour



of atomic particles together with the knowledge that neurophysiologists have of the functioning of brain cells since both of these are committed to the fundamental principle.

It is possible to escape these criticisms by acknowledging that immaterial mental events do not produce physical events. *But*, the physical events in the brain *can* cause the mental event of the mind. In short, the mind is like the froth on a wind-blown sea or the whistle on a steam train: caused by something physical but unable to affect it. This idea is called **epiphenomenalism**. Its single attraction appears to be that it allows the dualist to sidestep the scientific causation problem.

Its main detraction is that it debars us from acknowledging that other minds exist. One way of recognising other minds is to observe a person's manifestly intelligent behaviour. The epiphenomenalist cannot do this because, on his theory, minds play no part in explaining the physical world since they cannot interact with it.

From all of the above, we might think that dualism is a dead duck: none of the reasoning put forward to support it is sound; several telling problems count against it. Of course, neither of these objections means that dualism is false - they just make it difficult to see how it could possibly be true. That said, there are intelligent people who know all the above arguments and yet still maintain a dualistic stance, insisting that mental properties will never be fully explained in physical terms (see our discussion of *qualia* below). These are **property dualists**.



### Monist theories of mind

At this point, we can turn to the alternative position: the mind and the brain are not two things but just one. This is **monism**: the claim that there is just one sort of thing in the world. This contrasts with **dualism** which claims there are two sorts of things: mental and material. It is possible to go for a monism where everything is mental (as in Berkeley's idealism, for instance), but most monists go for everything being material. This is called **materialism** but, in modern times, instead of insisting on everything being made of matter, it is acknowledged that there are really two aspects of the stuff of the world: matter and energy. To distinguish this acknowledgement from materialism, the idea is referred to as **physicalism** (but the terms are often used interchangeably).

In terms of mind/body, physicalist theories of mind maintain that the mind is wholly explainable in terms of activities of the brain. One of the attractions of this as an idea is that we can use the power of scientific investigation to elucidate what appears to be the mental world.

There are several physicalist theories and we'll look at three of the most popular of them: identity theories; behaviourism; functionalism.

### Identity Theories of Mind

There are a couple of these which have a similarity in that they seek to *identify* mental states with some sort of brain states.

#### a) Type-identity theory

This proposes that a particular mental event is identical with a physical one. In other words, there is a one-to-one relationship between one mental event and one physical



event. The thought 'This is thrilling' (a mental event) is identical with a particular bit of neuro-physical activity in the brain. The two are identical in just the same way that 'feeling excited' and 'having enhanced levels of adrenaline in the blood' are identical: they are two different descriptions which we use in different circumstances. The first for everyday talking, the second for more scientific analysis. By concentrating on the latter, we can (on this theory) simply translate mental events into their equivalent physical ones.

One immediate objection to this is its implausibility. It seems highly unlikely that if we all share the thought 'This chair is hard' that we all are experiencing absolutely identical physical events in our brains. Indeed, brain scanners show that different areas of the brain are utilised by different people when given the same thoughts to consider.

A second objection is they cannot be identical since they do not share the same important property of intentionality (or 'aboutness'). Our mental states are always about something, directed towards something. This is not the case for physical states of the brain which are not aimed at something outside themselves in the way that mental states are.

A third objection which this theory shares with other physicalist theories is that it does not account of our conscious experience of things - the sensation of redness, the feeling of pain, the emotion of hate. Such conscious experiences are usually referred to as *qualia* (pronounced kwah-lee-ah). Describing the taste of a sip of coffee in terms of electro-chemical activity of brain cells seems to miss out something essential to the experience itself and so cannot be a full explanation of the mental.

### **b) Token-identity theory**

To get round at least one of these objections, token-identity theory sticks with the idea that mental states are identical with physical states but allows that thoughts of the same thing need not be precisely identical with activity in the brain. So, your thought 'This chair is hard' and my thought 'This chair is hard' are the same (are identical) but our brain states are simply tokens rather than being the same type. An illustration of this difference in meaning is to think of dogs: an individual dog is a *token* of the *type* dog (the species). Not all dogs are identical but they share an essential similarity. [In philosophy, things of the same *type* are interchangeable - 'The father of Emily and Alec' and 'This philosophy teacher' are interchangeable because they are the same type. However, I am also a human being but I cannot be as easily swapped with another human being - human beings are called *tokens* because they are the same sort of thing but cannot be interchanged without losing truth.]

Though this eludes one objection, it creates another. What this theory seems to allow is the possibility of two people being physically identical (to the last atom and brain activity) yet who are completely different mentally. This separates the mental so far from the physical that the relationship between the two becomes almost as mysterious as the dualist account.

A different approach is to be an out-and-out sceptic about this thing called 'mind' and stick to what we can regard as the observable facts: what people do rather than what they are supposedly thinking. This approach is called behaviourism and has proved a popular explanation especially amongst the 'scientifically-minded'.

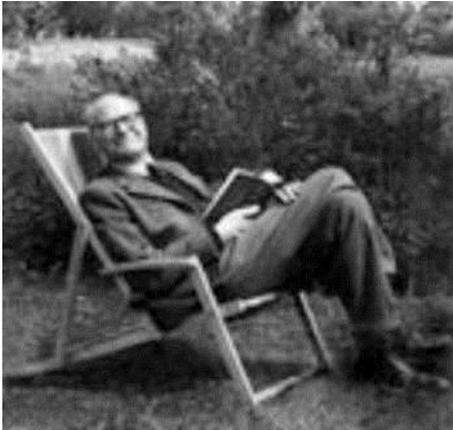
### **Behaviourism - 'mind' as a nonentity**

Behaviourism is a good example of the sort of *analytic philosophy* associated with the 'Anglo-American' tradition in philosophy where problems are cleared up through a clarification of terms and ideas that are used in our language.



In philosophy books you may come across the term *logical behaviourism* - this is merely to distinguish it from a branch of biology which uses the term *behaviourism*. The two terms are not equivalent so no real confusion should arise (unless you are disputing with a biologist).

### Solving the Problem of Mind



Gilbert Ryle (1900 - 76) and other behaviourists sought to *replace* 'mind' with an analysis that did not include any reference to 'mind' or 'mental states' at all. In his book *The Concept of Mind* he disparaged dualism in particular as 'the dogma of the ghost in the machine' i.e. the mind as a ghost, the body as a machine.

He thought that the traditionally difficult philosophical questions like 'What is mind?' and 'What is mental?' were pseudo-questions in that they had no sensible answer because the terms used ('mind' and 'mental') had no sensible meaning. He sought to analyse the language which referred to such mental attributes in such a way that all reference to the mental was *replaced* by reference to the

non-mental. If this were successful, then the pseudo-questions would be dissolved.

Ryle claimed that, at bottom, when we speak of minds or mental events, we speak of *behaviour*. Let's use an example to see what he means.

*"I believe that the weather is wet and cold outside. "*

This includes a mental state of *belief* How might this be analysed away? Obviously, this belief might cause different people to behave in different ways. Also, it might cause one individual to behave in different ways: they might put on a thick coat; they might light a fire, make some tea and settle down with a good book. Since these behaviours are not in any way equivalent the behaviourist says that what underlies the particular behaviour that occurs is a *disposition*: a tendency to act in a certain way given certain circumstances. Thus, behaviour can include the *conditional statements* of the form "If.. .then..." Thus "If the weather is wet and cold and I need to go out, **then** I will put on a thick coat."



It is worth emphasising the behaviourist's agenda here: the complete replacement of mental language without loss of expressive power.

If this cannot be achieved, then behaviourism is a dying (if not dead) duck.

### Criticisms of behaviourism

The first objection might be that the whole idea is impractical. You will have noticed the woolliness of the phrase 'certain circumstances' in the last paragraph but one. Given that, in life, circumstances are highly variable then any paraphrasing of the mental language used will be infinitely long - and hence useless.

The obvious reply from the behaviourist is that this doesn't matter a bit. No-one is saying that we have to throw out completely the convenient way we have of referring to what we think (by using mental language referring to things like minds, wants, hopes, beliefs, and so on). No, all the behaviourist is saying is that this is possible to do such an analysis *in principle*. It *could* be done which shows that it is not impossible to achieve.

Unfortunately for the behaviourist, this runs into the problem of distinguishing between things that are possible in principle and those that are conceptually possible. At first sight, these seem pretty distinct. Walking on water is possible in principle, for instance. However, having ' $2 + 2 = 5$ ' is impossible to imagine - it is conceptually impossible. In more recent times, the distinction between the two has become to be



seen as unsatisfactory. Consider decapitation and whether it can be survived. Conceptually, this might seem possible since one can imagine it happening. But *is it* possible to actually hold that surviving decapitation is possible given our knowledge of biology? Following this line of argument we might say to the behaviourist that analysing to infinity is like counting to infinity and ask if such a thing is both conceptually possible and possible in practice. If they cannot establish that such a thing is possible, then their assertion of paraphrasing to infinity being possible in principle is suspect.

A second objection to behaviourism grants that it is possible to paraphrase away mental states like 'belief (which has a pretty clear link to behaviour) but that this does not work for *all* mental states. What, for example, about imagining and reflecting? Well, thinking of counting is explained by Ryle as a *refraining* from counting out loud. This has a plausibility about it but it will hardly do as an explanation: imagining an elephant is hardly a refraining from seeing an elephant.

Thirdly, if someone were incapable of behaviour, then the behaviourist would have to conclude that the person had no mind/mental activity. This, we know, is not the case for people who are unlucky enough to be totally paralysed - they do often have a rich mental life.

The lack of explanation is a fourth objection raised against behaviourism. When some action is performed by a human, a legitimate question is to ask why it was done. Much of our mental language provides such explanations: "I put on the coat *because* it was cold." The behaviourist would paraphrase this into: "I put on the coat because I will put on the coat when it is cold." But we want an explanation to give a reason and not be a mere description of the form 'X does Y because, in certain circumstances, X does Y'. 'Why does wood burn?' is not answered by saying 'Wood burns when you set light to it.' Because behaviourism fails to give convincing explanations in the way that mental language does, it is deficient.

The main problem with behaviourism, however, is that it disallows the existence of mental states - that internal appreciation of our wants, feelings, emotions which we seem to have and that is known immediately by the individual and the individual alone. I know if I am in pain without having to ask you (or myself) whether I am in pain. In other words, I do not have to observe behaviour to gain knowledge of the state of things. These mental states, especially our beliefs about the world, *cause* our behaviour. Thus, putting on a coat because I don't want to get wet and cold seems a fair enough reason - but notice that it contains a mental state, a *desire*. Can the behaviourist paraphrase away this desire? The answer is they can't without referring back to one's beliefs - which, of course, are mental states. It seems that mental states are ineluctable and hence the behaviourist agenda cannot be carried through.

That said, there is perceived to be a great value in behaviourism, and that is its emphasis on the connection between mental states and behaviour. The value consists in behaviour being a means of objectively accessing other people's minds (something the dualist will always have difficulty accommodating). The next theory of mind takes this strength but tries to avoid the weaknesses of behaviourism that were outlined above.

### **Functionalism - mind as process**

The attraction of this theory of mind is that it adopts the strength of the behaviourist theory, but drops its insistence on beliefs being mere patterns of behaviour. It also avoids most of the objections to the identity theories of mind by changing the focus of the question of what we take 'mind' to be. Rather than asking 'What is the mind?' which, as we have seen, leads to no satisfactory resolution, functionalists insist that this is not the question to ask at all. They say that the one to ask is 'What does the mind do?'

The reason for this shift of emphasis is that the question 'What is the mind?' presupposes that there is a thing for a mind to be. Functionalists remove the necessity for this presupposition by avoiding referring to the mind as a 'thing'. Instead, they view the mind as a *process*. And the particular process that involves the mind is in its *function* of the interaction of our beliefs with our behaviour.



This might strike you as a bit of an evasion at first sight. However, most objects are defined in terms of what they do (how they function) rather than what they are made of or how they look (what they are). Thus a chair is ordinarily defined as 'something fairly comfortable to sit on' (its function) rather than 'made of metal/wood' or 'bum-sized flat surface with back-rest and legs for stability' (what it is). Further, we have some very respectable concepts which refer to very scientific sorts of things but are not, in themselves, things in the usual sense at all. 'Digestion', for example is a noun and so looks like it might be like other nouns and be a label for a 'thing'. But, of course, we know that this is not so: 'digestion' isn't a thing at all, it is a process. When the gut does its stuff, then we get 'digestion'. In other words, when the gut functions effectively as a gut, it 'produces' digestion. In the same way, when the brain functions effectively as a brain, it 'produces' what we refer to as 'mind'. If this is so, then mind is simply a function - something that happens when physical things do what physical things do.



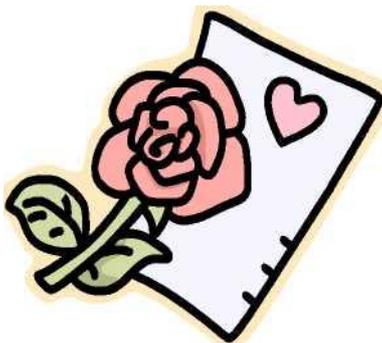
The strength of functionalism is in the way it links desire to action; and links both of these to our beliefs about the world. These links have a deeply common-sense flavour. Consider these two principles:

1. ***If someone desires that p, and believes that p will come about only if he does X then, in the absence of countervailing desires, he will usually do X.***
2. ***People normally believe the most obvious and immediate logical consequences of their other beliefs.***

Both of these are so deeply entrenched in the way we interpret the way that people behave in the world (along with other principles like believing what you see is actually there in front of you) that they are referred to as being a part of **folk psychology**. So, for example, if you **desire** to do well in your philosophy exam, and you **believe** that staying awake in my lessons will help, you will stay awake (principle 1). Staying awake in the lessons is an obvious and immediate logical consequence of the belief that my lessons will help you do well in your philosophy exam. Falling asleep will not (principle 2).

An objection at this point is that these two principles are too vague: the first principle contains the word 'usually'; the second contains the word 'normally'. A reply is that these words are essential because human beings sometimes (but not normally, or usually) do things 'without thinking' such as absent-mindedly pocketing something in a shop when you don't mean to steal it, or standing out in a hailstorm just to get hurt. A full account of human behaviour has to take into account the fact that we sometimes behave irrationally.

Another objection to functionalism is that it, like identity theories and behaviourism, seems to leave out qualia - what it **feels** like to be a person. A thought-experiment that illustrates this deficiency runs as follows.



Imagine a neuro-scientist called Mary. She has been brought up in a single building for the whole of her life. Within the building, everything is in black, white, and shades of grey: she has never experienced anything coloured. She has learnt to associate the different shades of grey with the names of colours. One shade of grey, for instance, she always recognises and calls 'red'. She recognises this colour every time and responds accordingly - the 'red' envelopes containing information on memory-



circuitry she always files in the correct ('colour-coded') place. She correctly identifies fire engines and post boxes in black-and-white photographs as being 'red'. She also knows all there is to know about colour theory and how the brain interprets signals from the eyes to generate colour.

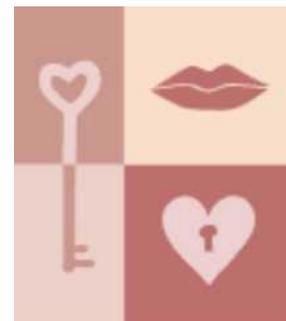
Now, so far as her mind goes, Mary *functions* as if she knows colours: she cannot be distinguished in her behaviour from anyone who has not been brought up in her own peculiar way. In other words, from a functionalist point of view, there is no difference between Mary and anyone else. But here we get to the crux of the thought- experiment.

One day a secret admirer smuggles a single red rose into Mary's laboratory and leaves it on her desk. She comes into the room and sees something that is really red for the first time in her life. A red rose rather than a grey one. The argument is that her response to the real red rose will be quite different from her response to the 'normal' grey one - because qualia like redness are not accounted for in functionalist terms.

Though this looks like a good knock-down blow against functionalism, there is a reply. The way functionalists tackle it is to point out that the knowledge we acquire in our lives (and on which we base our beliefs and behaviour) comes in two stages. First comes experience, and then comes recognition, or learning more about the experience to turn it into 'proper' knowledge. Thus, when very young, we experience colour and, at some later stage, learn to recognise it for what it is. Because it is hard for us to remember whether this is a good account, functionalists point to another sort of knowledge where it is possible to acknowledge that we can know something without really appreciating it. They point to falling in love.

Mary sees the secret admirer putting the rose on her desk and experiences an odd feeling about him. She has never experienced the feeling before but she knows she is experiencing something new. What could this feeling mean?

A week or two later she reads a romantic novel and in it finds a description of someone who falls in love. She recognises it as exactly the way she is feeling about the admirer - she has learnt that she has fallen in love! So, though in one sense she knew she was in love from the moment of seeing the admirer with the rose (the feeling she experienced was that of love), she did not know she was in love until the feeling acquired a functional status once she knew it for what it was.



Though this seems persuasive, it has not convinced everyone. That said, functionalism is currently one of the most popular theories entertained by philosophers of mind.

### Could animals or machines be persons?

We have spent a lot of time so far on looking at the different features which make up a 'person'. We have explored the possibilities of whether a person has just a body, a body and a mind, perhaps also a 'soul'; we have looked at the question of 'self'; we have outlined some of the characteristics of people that give them 'personality'. The



question at the top of this section asks whether human beings are the only sort of thing that could be considered 'persons'

If your immediate response is that 'you can't be a person unless you are a human' then you've rather missed the point. The possibilities mentioned in the preceding paragraph should remind you that there is a whole lot more to being a person than merely being a human. An obvious objection to this putative 'immediate response' is to point out that not all humans are persons (severely brain-damaged individuals, say) and that what counts as a person is a range of abilities including, perhaps, language, reason, sense of self, emotional involvement, social instincts, and so on. If it is agreed that a 'person' is defined as 'something with a certain range of abilities' (with that range being debatable, of course) then it seems rather narrow-minded to exclude any other sort of entity simply because we are the only *current* sort of being that fits the bill.

Three things seem possible. The first is that another animal species might track our evolutionary path and, like us, develop the range of abilities that class us as 'persons'. The second is that machines might develop this range of abilities some time in the future.

Finally, beings from other planets might already have developed this range of abilities and might one day pay us a visit. We could then entertain the idea of a 4-way interchange among 4 types of persons: human-persons, (say) dolphin- persons, machine-persons and planetX-persons.

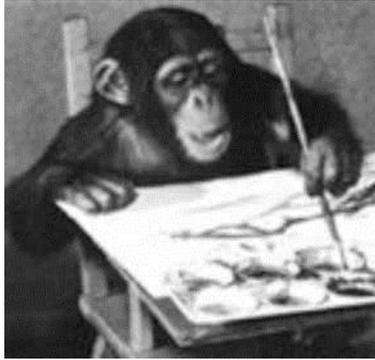
It would be an interesting thought-experiment to predict the sorts of things such a group might discuss...



## Animals

What seems to be clear from the scientific study of animals is that, in certain species at least, there is evidence of a 'mind' that shares at least some of the range of abilities we have been talking about, at least to some degree.

Clearly, animals are *conscious* in that they are aware of the world around them and can interact with it. Some animals also show that they are *self-conscious* in that they can recognise themselves as a specific entity within the world (usually demonstrated by allowing them to view themselves in a mirror). Social animals such as chimpanzees also demonstrate a *knowledge of 'other minds'* in that they can 'see things' from another chimp's point of view. So, for example, a low-ranking mother chimp whose offspring is being beaten by a higher-ranking mother's offspring will often recruit the top female to break up the fight. This seems to show that the low-ranking female has detached her thinking from her own point of view and appreciated how the other females will perceive the same situation but from *their* points of view. Artistic *creativity* has been demonstrated in elephants and chimps with at least one individual ('Kongo' the chimp) only being 'satisfied' with a painting when it achieved some recognisable 'composition'. Many animals (among the birds and mammals groups) *dream* and have *emotions* - one can tell from expressions and body language when dogs and chimps, for example, are content or upset. Some chimps and some birds can demonstrate the ability to *reason* to a certain extent by solving problems through insight rather than by trial-and-error.



On the other hand, this reasoning ability is very limited in comparison with human abilities both in depth and extent. As an instance of this, it seems that no animal other than humans has developed the ability to employ the concept of number. We, for instance, can readily appreciate that 25 is three more than 22 without any mental strain. Animals do have something called 'numerosity' which is the ability to appreciate the number of things directly (crows know that three things are greater than two things) but take away the 'things' to which the number concept is attached then they are bereft (unlike us who can conceive of 25, 3 and 22 as unattached from 'things' altogether).

Humans also have a very well-developed moral agency where we hold ourselves responsible for our ethical behaviour. We do not expect animals to be responsible in the same way: male dolphins forcing female dolphins into sex are not 'rapists'; lions killing lion cubs are not 'murderers'; rats eating a farmer's corn are not 'thieves'. All this indicates that they do not have the type of mind (perhaps as yet?) where such ethical concerns impinge. That said, there does seem to be a sense of justice amongst social monkeys and primates. Experiments show that, for example, rewarding two monkeys differently for doing the same task provokes dissatisfaction in the less well-rewarded monkey. It has been argued that our sense of morality has developed from this innate sense of social justice.

Finally, human language is of a quite different order from the sort of communication that takes place between other animals. The first thing worth noting is that the sounds that we make show no greater range than that which other primates make (about 40 distinct noises like 'sh' and 'ah' and 'puh'). What is distinctively different is what we do with this range of sounds: we put them together in an infinitely varying way. In the animal world of sound, one sound means one thing and one thing only: 'kee' means 'look out for the aerial predator' and nothing else, ever. In human language this sound can crop up in quite different places to convey quite different things, e.g. 'keep monkeys keen on risky schemes' uses 'kee' five times but the noise has a different contribution to the meaning of the words, and the meaning of the sentence.

A second thing worth pointing out is that humans also have the type of communication that animals have even when we don't use 'language'. We can communicate our feeling perhaps even more readily with this 'animal communication': we blush with embarrassment, roar with laughter, sob with grief, jump for joy, and so on.

Finally, the ability to frame concepts in a language has given us the capacity to order thoughts, communicate complex information accurately and quickly, examine ideas critically without action being necessary. Thus, language seems to be crucial to being a 'higher' being - a person. It can be argued that without the capacity for language, thought (as we know it) would be impossible.

### Our Moral Relationship with (Other) Animals

We generally all agree on bestowing other humans (at least when we consider them to be persons) a moral status. We are moral agents and we treat other moral agents in a way that is different from the way we treat non-moral agents. In other words, there is a moral dimension in which humans operate but where no other things count (unless you believe in the supernatural, perhaps). The philosophical issue here is whether this drawing of a moral boundary between humans and other animals can be done on any reasonable grounds.





Our first question is to address the quality of any justification that is on offer which is based on this claim that the moral dimension is uniquely human. Why do only humans occupy it?

There is a religious answer to this: God created humans to have a special relationship with Him. It is our possession of what might be termed a 'spark of divinity' which opens up this moral dimension to us and no other things in His creation (such as dogs, trees and stones). Even if this is true, we can still question what the justification might be for saying that we ought not to kick a harmless dog, perhaps ought to refrain from kicking a harmless tree, perhaps ought not to bother at all about kicking a harmless stone.

Naturally, non-Believers will demand reasons other than those that appeal to Belief. Classically, the criteria offered which distinguish humans from other entities are: reason; language; moral agency. What we'll examine is the question of '*given* that humans are a distinguishable group, why do members of this, and only this, group have moral status?'

The first philosopher credited with extending moral status beyond the confines of humans, or duties to humans, is the utilitarian Bentham. You will remember that he was occupied by the summing of pleasure/pain to decide on the best way to behave. Thus he was entirely consistent in claiming that the pleasure and pain of animals should also be taken into consideration irrespective of whether humans were involved.



In this he was going against Kant who said that, for example, you shouldn't kick a dog because you would upset its master and upsetting people is wrong. Even if the dog was ownerless, kicking it would, though not wrong in itself, make you more likely to go on a kick people which is wrong and so you shouldn't kick the dog for that reason. Bentham thought this argument of Kant's to be totally unacceptable: you shouldn't kick the dog *for the dog's sake*. Bentham justified this by pointing out that, in kicking the dog you were *increasing suffering*: this was the reason for dog-kicking being bad.

So, with Bentham we have an extending of the moral dimension to include beings capable of suffering - this group of beings we call **sentient**. Of course, quite how far this dimension extends into the animal kingdom is a matter of some debate but the principle itself is

clear, as is the acknowledgement that any being that has a similar physical structure to humans (other mammals, for instance) are capable of physical suffering too and hence should be accorded independent moral status, i.e. they have a right to consideration independent of any human involvement.

The most well-known recent advocate of the cause of sentient animals is the moral philosopher Peter Singer. Singer is a utilitarian and emphasizes the equality of consideration that should be given to considerations of pleasure and pain: there is no justification for neglecting the pleasure and pain of animals. If you do this you are simply being **speciesist**. This term (coined by Ryder) is deliberately an echo of 'racism' and 'sexism': both of these attitudes sought to draw lines between beings and confer advantages/disadvantages accordingly. Singer maintains that there is no justification for drawing a line at the boundary of *Homo sapiens* and saying pain on 'our' side is any different from pain on 'theirs'. He points out that any being which has the capacity for suffering also has an *interest* in not suffering - and this interest ought to be taken into consideration. Since trees and stones have no such 'interests' they are not of moral concern.



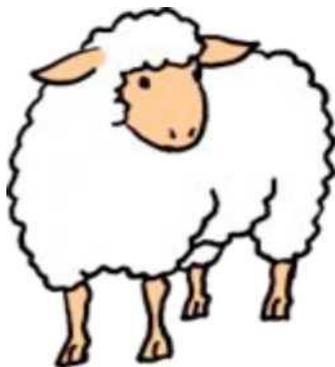
One point worth making here is that Singer is not committed to other sentient animals being put on a *fully equal status* with each other (including humans): a mouse with cancer is not equal to a human with cancer. What he is arguing is that, for example, like pain should be compared with like pain in the consideration about what action to take. Thus, if the pain of a mouse is a hundredth of that of a human, then the pain of 100 cancerous mice should be given the same weight as the one cancerous human. (But note that this is still far too simplistic as an example - there are many other elements that will go into the calculus besides just the individual pains, including fears, family, expectations, etc. The point is that the animals' pain *counts*.)



One thing that might give us pause here is the idea of mental anguish. The human capacity for suffering has a huge extra dimension. If you lock a well-fed, well-watered healthy dog in a room then it will not worry. If you do the same (without reason) to a human, the human will immediately begin to worry: will I ever be let out? What will they do to me next? Who will tell my family where I am? Singer acknowledges all this and then, notoriously, points out the reasonable consequences of his analysis with respect to a choice between either rescuing a young chimpanzee from a burning room or the mentally-deficient disabled child. For Singer, it is the chimp that is/would suffer more from being threatened with being burnt to death and so it is the chimp that ought to be rescued.

Before turning to criticisms, let us see him use his arguments against meat-eating and animal-experimentation. He points out that meat-eating is unnecessary (vegetarianism can be just as healthy an option) and that meat-farming involves animal suffering. On these grounds, animal-farming is wrong. He also claims that many animal-involved experiments are not necessary to alleviate human suffering or do not relieve more suffering than they cause (at the time, he will have had in mind things like the testing of shampoos for irritability on the eyes of rabbits). Singer indicates that these arguments can easily be extended to include banning of the fur trade and hunting in its various forms.

It is interesting to see how Singer's arguments will permit some activities involving animals. The Inuit, for example, have no option but to eat a lot of meat since vegetables don't grow well in the snow. For them, meat-eating is necessary - the suffering of starving humans outweighs the suffering of the seals. Also, some small 'green' farmers care beautifully for their animals so there is no question of their suffering and the animals' death is as humane as possible (possibly more so than some unfortunate people). Here again, eating animals would be permitted.



One further line developed from this line of thinking is to prohibit the keeping of animals merely for 'exploitation'. He points out that there are plenty of readily-available substitutes for wool, for instance. Keeping sheep simply as wool-producers (even if allowing them to live and die as naturally as possible) is wrong: the sheep's putative interests are not being taken into consideration. In accordance with this, consuming milk, cheese, eggs and other such products (if other foods are available) is morally wrong - a position adopted by vegans.

It is at this point, even if we dislike the idea of animal experimentation, even if we are not meat-eaters, that we might pause. As the feet nestle comfortably in leather shoes, a warm woolly jumper keeping out the cold, the thought of a delicious toasted cheese sandwich for lunch, many of us will start looking for good reasons not to follow Singer in his canvas shoes and cotton sweater striding purposefully towards his thin cabbage soup.

Before considering objections, it is right to emphasise how successful such arguments have proved in concrete terms: it is certainly the case that (in many Western countries at least) the lot of domesticated



animals has ameliorated hugely in the last few decades. Many people accept that the use of animals in scientific research should take account of the animals' interests, that they should suffer as little as possible and only suffer if 'greater good' accrues - perhaps the development of better medicines to cure dying humans, for example. Many people have given up eating meat for moral rather than (or as well as) for other reasons. Even some of those who have not stopped meat-eating now insist on 'free-range' meat and animal products which points to a concern for the well-being of domesticated creatures. Strictures on the wearing of real fur and the hunting of wild animals are further examples of the influence of philosophical ideas on our lives.

Of course, this may not all be due to Singer's utilitarianism - other arguments which do not rest on this system are available as we shall see. In fact, few philosophers are convinced by Singer's arguments and we will turn to a couple of alternatives after considering some of the objections that are levelled at him.

We will leave to one side the general arguments against utilitarianism as a moral system. A more particular objection to Singer's argument that we should become vegetarian is to point out that, even if we grant his premises as being true, they do not force us to his conclusion. Here are his premises:

P1 We should aim to reduce suffering. [The utilitarian premise.]

P2 We should take animal suffering into consideration. [The anti-speciesist premise.]

P3 Animal suffering is involved in meat-production. [An empirical observation.] P4 Our 'suffering' by not eating meat is less than the suffering of the animals involved. [An empirical observation.]

Therefore, we should stop eating meat.

The first objection aims at premise 4. If each of us were isolated with our actions having no effects on others then this premise would do the work Singer demands of it. But this is not the case for the great majority of people. Our actions affect others around us. If a mother decides to become a vegetarian this can have a major negative impact - does she insist on the rest of the family joining her? Will she insist on special treatment if invited out for a meal at a friend's house? Thus, even though we grant the premise as true, it ignores the strong possibility that the *suffering of other people with whom we interact* could make us continue to eat meat on utilitarian grounds. In other words, the opposite of Singer's conclusion.

Notice that this doesn't knock Singer out - he could amend his conclusion to saying that we, as individuals, should cut down on meat-consumption, favour free-range products, encourage others to do the same until eventual becoming vegetarian. This rescues his argument but at the expense of immediacy: he would much rather we all gave up meat-eating overnight. But it also leaves meat-eaters with the argument that they should (eventually) stop.

The other premises in his argument can also be objected to. If, for example, suffering of farm animals could be reduced to (or below) the suffering experienced in what, for the sake of argument, we might call a 'normal' level for animals in general, then the conclusion would not follow. It may well be argued that a farmyard chicken, protected from disease and predators, well-fed, well-housed and humanely killed, suffers in its life rather less than a wild bird which may well face hunger, the attentions of predators at all times of the day and night, disease and, most likely, an untimely death.



A further consideration here is whether non-life is preferable to life. Obviously, the easiest way to eliminate all suffering in animals is to eliminate all animals. This, I guess, we would all see as being absurd. However, if we did ban the commercial keeping of chickens then the number of chickens in the world would be dramatically reduced - which might reduce 'greatest happiness' in the utilitarian principle that is used in the argument above.

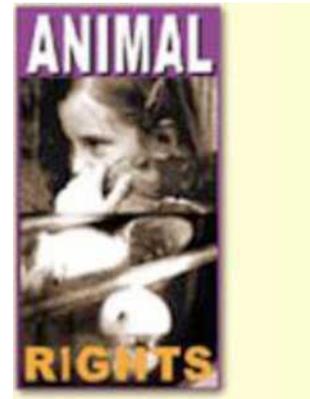


Consequently, if you want to see fields being grazed by sheep and cows you should then wear wool and leather, eat mutton and beef: it will keep them from extinction.

Two final objections deal with whether 'speciesism' (as in premise 2 in Singer's argument) is morally exceptional or not (to be dealt with below) and, as mentioned at the outset, whether utilitarianism is an adequate ethical system in any event.

### Animal 'Rights'?

An alternative to Singer's utilitarian approach to according animals a certain moral status is to argue that, just as we all enjoy 'human rights', these can be extended, where appropriate, to animals. Such rights might be negative freedoms such as freedom from exploitation and freedom from unnecessary suffering, as well as positive freedoms such as access to a natural habitat and freedom to live a natural life.



The fundamental premise of this argument is to identify what it is that gives us humans moral status - and which could then form the basis of our 'human rights'. The claim is that all humans have something called 'inherent value'. This is something that we are born with and it can never be alienated (that is, it is not the sort of thing that can be given away or separated from us - it is an essential characteristic of being human). This 'inherent value' appeals to something outside the utilitarian scheme of things. For example, if killing someone definitely produces greater happiness for the greatest number, then killing that person is the right thing to do. People who reject utilitarianism will probably say that, notwithstanding the increased happiness, it is still wrong to kill an innocent person because we should have some respect for them simply because they are a person - in other words, persons have something which we must respect in all circumstances: 'inherent value'.

The claim about all humans having 'inherent value' applies to all humans regardless of any distinguishing features that different humans might have such as gender, age, race, creed, political outlook. All persons have equal 'inherent value' (no matter how mentally or physically impaired a person may be). Now, if we have 'inherent value' and it has nothing to do with such features just listed, what is it about humans that gives us this value? The answer given is that persons are 'experiencing subjects of a life' and so we can say that 'All experiencing subjects of a life have equal inherent value'.

What quickly follows from this is that some animals are also 'experiencing subjects of a life': they have consciousness, respond to the world, interact in relationships, have desires, emotions, and so on. So, they now fit the equation of having inherent value which confers on them the right to be treated as having moral status. This means that, at the very least, they should not be treated in ways that we would not treat any human (no matter how nasty that human were). Three such ways might be:

- Not being killed just because one's body might be useful
- Not being tortured
- Not to be used as an experimental subject against one's will.



I guess that we'd all agree that no human should be subjected to any of these treatments. The 'rights-based' argument then pushes us towards the premise about being speciesist - drawing a distinction between entities which can all be 'experiencing subjects of a life' is wrong. Hence, (certain) animals have rights such as not to be killed for food, not to be closely caged, not to be used in experiments. Ignoring these rights is wrong.

This is a strong argument. Those who wish to reject its conclusions are often at something of a loss as to where to begin. After all, we (probably) don't want to say that a human being could be used in a medical experiment, or be killed just so someone else could have their heart. We also (probably) don't want to be speciesist by insisting that humans are special in some way that (certain) animals are not.

One approach to it is to say that animals (apart from humans, of course) are not the sort of thing to which the concept of rights applies. An analogy that might help is to think of a great work of art: it commands our respect; it would be wrong to destroy it. This makes sense to us. But what if someone then said that it is wrong to destroy a work of art because it has rights? This makes no sense. So, perhaps animals are like works of art rather than humans in this regard - we should respect them, value them, but not think of them as having rights. Because, if they don't have rights then it is not wrong to eat them or use them in experiments.

The question now becomes why are we humans the type of thing which has rights?

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The short answer is that we are the only species capable of fully appreciating what rights are. Without going into any depth we should just look at what a 'right' consists in. For example, if I bought the original 'Mona Lisa' would I have the right to snip it into pieces and then set fire to them? You might say that I can do what I want to with my own property (I have a legal right to destroy the painting) but that such wanton destruction is still wrong - there is a *moral* dimension too. But where have the moral dimension and the legal right come from? Again, short answers are that our moral code has developed over time from our capacity to reason and reflect on such issues; legal rights from institutions and conventions which are, again, unique to humans. Hence, the concept of rights only applies where there is a background of conventions and institutions and, on this planet at least, no other species apart from humans has developed such sophistications and hence for no other species (or other thing like works of art) does it make sense to speak of rights.

(A consequence of this view is that humans also have duties and responsibilities along with these rights - the duty to respect the rights of others and the responsibility to protect the rights of others. Animals, of course, are notorious for not having such respect and responsibility. Birds do not respect our property rights, cats are totally irresponsible when it comes to the right to life of birds.)

This argument (most closely associated with the philosopher Hume but also with modern adherents such as Rawls and Scruton) is often referred to as 'contractarian' since it implies that we are the sort of creature capable of entering into 'contracts' with other people with rights on the one hand, responsibilities on the other. Notice that it does not exclude the possibility that we have a duty not to cause suffering - and this duty would mean that we should not treat animals harshly. However, it does permit us to treat them differently from humans in that we can eat them and use them in experiments where it can be justified on humane grounds.

A counter-argument is to point out that some humans (babies, or the mentally incapacitated, for example) cannot enter into 'contracts' so does this mean that we can eat them or experiment on them? (This is an 'absurd consequences' move - pointing out that the argument you don't like leads to consequences that are silly and hence the argument must be flawed.) A reply is that babies at least have the *potential* for entering into contracts so we must let them grow up - just as we don't let babies or young children make other contractual arrangements like getting married or voting.

But this reply is not a full one: what about the person mentally incapacitated to the degree that they will never regain consciousness? Can we kill them and use any of their useful organs to help other people?



We might like to say that we shouldn't do this sort of thing out of respect for humans, that they are, by birth, members of our species and so, no matter what their state, have rights to respect.

This again brings in the accusation of speciesism which we can now turn to. Mary Midgley, a philosopher on the side of the liberationists, does not go as far as supporting the above arguments for the banning of meat production and the use of animals in experimentation. Her case is that though we have a duty to animals it is not speciesist to separate the claims of humans from those of animals: speciesism is *not* the same as racism or sexism, that equality of treatment is not at issue.



She bases this claim on the practical aspects of our moral behaviour. If I have a daughter and she were in my class then, of course, it would be wrong to show her favour when it comes to marking her work. However, if I show her favour by buying her a birthday present this is not wrong - I am not being 'familyist'. In fact, if I didn't give her a birthday present I would be a bad father. This shows us that being impartial - treating people equally - is not always the thing to do. There exist levels of appropriateness with respect to certain actions - including those with moral dimensions. We regard it as right that, in a choice between saving one rather than another (where only one can be saved):

- a parent would save their own child
- a sibling would save a sibling
- cousins would save cousins, etc.

However, in the same circumstances but where the two to choose between are strangers, it would not be wrong to choose on the grounds of race or sex.

Midgley says that the very roots of our ethical behaviour are to be found in the natural relationships that exist in close family, extended family, community, even nation and, ultimately, species. If we extirpate these (by applying, say the utilitarian approach, or the rights-based approach) then we are in grave danger of losing the natural basis of our morality - and that this natural basis is the strongest one to help us behave well. Without it, we could all behave lots worse and that is not desirable.

## Machines

It is undeniable that many machines have abilities that duplicate - and often exceed - human attributes. Thus, your calculator is almost certainly quicker and more accurate than you are when it comes to arithmetic; a chess-playing machine probably better than you at winning at chess. Current computers can produce designs, explore the world's publications for information, create music. That said, few of us would call a machine 'intelligent' - certainly not a 'person'. But might we in the future? There have been quite a few recent innovations where small machines have proved popular as things to which humans can relate: they are rather like pets, something to 'look after' which seems to desire or require the human to do something for the machine.

In America, such machines are being designed for adults, machines which will interact with their owner by asking and answering questions, perhaps performing chores like book- and diary-keeping.

It is easy to see how this might well appeal to the human psyche - it seems to be a universal trait for us to treat things as persons, perhaps, deep down, to be programmed to deal with the world in this way. I suppose cars (and just males?) are a notorious example of this: petted and polished, caressed and praised, sworn at when broken down - even given a name and a 'character'. Given this human tendency, then it is not difficult to imagine (especially given the high volume of popular science-fiction) that one day there may well be robots built that are very effective at interaction with humans. Our question here is whether they could ever be regarded as 'persons'.



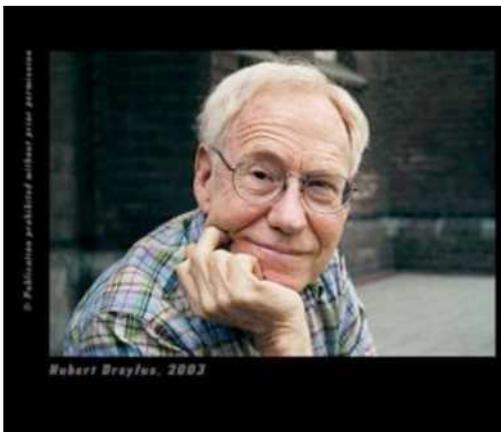
One key attribute that separates us from animals is our language. Could this ability help us distinguish between persons and machines? John Searle (1932 - ) produced an analogy to point up the difference between our language use and that of a machine - it is referred to as the Chinese Room argument. Searle's thought-experiment is to house a non-Chinese speaker in a room in which there is an instruction manual and sacks full of tiles inscribed with different Chinese characters. Outside the room, a Chinese person posts a sequence of tiles through the letter-box. The person in the room takes this sequence, looks it up in the instruction manual which tells them to post out another sequence of tiles. They then collect up the appropriate tiles from the sacks in the room and slide them out through the letter box in the order stipulated.

To the person outside the room, it might appear as if the person in the room knows how to speak Chinese. But this is not so: all the person in the room is doing is manipulating symbols according to an instruction manual. The person in the room does not *understand* Chinese in the same way that a Chinese person understands what they say, hear, read and write.

Searle says that our current machines lack this capacity for understanding. All they do is manipulate symbols (very accurately and very quickly): their language-use is symbolic but not semantic.

Notice, however, that he does not rule out the possibility that future machines could understand the meaning of things in the same way that we understand them. After all, many philosophers are physicalists and so are committed to the idea that we humans are a sort of 'soft machine' with our brain components doing the sort of processing necessary to produce meaning. If one sort of machine (a brain) can do it, there seems to be no reason to suppose that another sort of machine (a computer, say) couldn't. This is the basic premise behind the Turing Test for intelligence. Alan Turing (1912 - 54) proposed that if a person were to communicate via a keyboard and monitor with a) another person, and b) a machine, and not be able to distinguish them as such, then the computer was 'intelligent'.

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The contemporary philosopher Hubert Dreyfus has pointed out that this sort of approach to 'intelligence' (as a key attribute of what we are thinking of as being a 'person') makes several key assumptions. These are: that brain cells work like the processing elements of computers; that the mind can be taken to be a device for

operating on bits of information according to formal rules; that human understanding is the sort of thing that can be formalised, i.e. it can be stated in terms of logical relations; that all facts are logically independent of one another. If these assumptions are not secured, then the theory that machines could

understand in the same way that humans do is insecure. We can look at the objections in turn.

The objection to the first assumption is that individual brain cells are not simply 'on' or 'off' when stimulated with a particular input. Whether a brain cell 'fires' or not depends on much more than the arrival of a stimulus. It depends, for example, on the state of other input connections and their condition, the chemical environment at that moment in and around the cell, the timing of the stimulus in relation to previous stimuli of that cell and others around it.

Dreyfus (and many other philosophers) points out that there is a big difference between knowing and know-how (which are often conflated under the term 'knowledge'). Simply knowing things is *not the full extent* of human knowledge. The example he uses is driving a car. One can acquire a lot of 'knowing' about this: which is the clutch pedal, how to apply the brakes without causing skidding, when to indicate



you intend to turn off the road, and so on. However, all this 'knowing' is not all there is to being a driver. The 'extra' is the skill of driving - learning to successfully operate a real car in real conditions. The thing about a skill is that it is open-ended - you will know what is best to do in a given situation without having to be told in specific detail what it is that you should do. If we accept this analysis, then it leads us to questioning the second and third assumptions. It seems that skills such as driving (and using language) do not rest exclusively on 'knowing' in terms of a set of propositions that we continually refer to like the machine continuously referring to its set of propositions in its programme. Neither are these skills open to being described formally - a skilled craftsman cannot explain what the skill entails but must demonstrate, direct and correct someone who is learning. In short, the language skill, like other human skills, is just not the sort of thing that can be formalised in a programme.

Finally, we come to the very structure of the way we understand the world to exist - the ontological status of things. Is it possible to abstract rules about this and then put them into a machine such that it finds 'meaning'? One way to see just how difficult (if not impossible) this would be, consider whether the following two sentences are related:

1. *It is a nice, warm day.*
2. *The price of parrots has gone up.*

On the face of it, you might say they are unrelated. But, if I say they are, in fact, related (and not merely because they are next to each other: their *meanings* are related) then you will not find it hard to make some sort of connection with them. A simple one might be that on warm days people are more likely to walk past a pet shop, see a parrot and buy one so making them scarcer and so pricier. Another one might be that global warming has been contributed to by decimation of rainforest. This leads to a rarity in parrots and hence an increase in their value. Global warming also leads to more nice, warm days.



The point to notice, however, is that even within these 'explanations' there are relations which I assume you know the meaning of - such as a scarcity leading to higher prices which, of course, implies a knowledge of various principles of economics as well as of principles of human behaviour. You also need to understand parrots as pets, as inhabitants of rain forests, the concept of 'nice' and days that are warm. In short, the programmer is faced with an impossible task if such things are to be programmed into a machine: there is just too much knowledge, too many relationships, too many possibilities to even start being able to credibly write a programme that could do the sort of thing that has just been demonstrated with the parrots and the warm day.

All that said, we can still restate the original question of the materialist: since it is clear that humans (as 'soft machines') can more-or-less effortlessly learn to manipulate meanings this way, then why not another sort of machine rather than one with an organic brain?

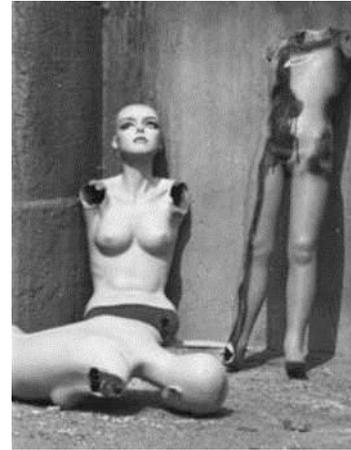
An answer to this again comes from Dreyfus. He points out that a huge amount of our basic knowledge is intimately related with our emotions and our sense organs. We 'know from within' what it is like to feel warm, how heavy a handful of feathers weighs, what a parrot's cage might smell like, and so on. It is our *embodiment* that gives us a link with how other persons interact with the same physical world - and perhaps a large part of the mental world, at least the parts in which sensation and emotion are involved. If we really wanted a machine to be persons like us, then it would be necessary to give it a body just like ours, emotions just like ours, language and culture just like ours. Since it is easier and cheaper to simply have sex to produce a person, then it seems unnecessary to produce persons mechanically - and a waste of time since, if they are just like humans, they will be superfluous.



If, however, such 'artificial soft machines' are wanted as a subhuman species for our exploitation, then producing them might be a worthwhile goal [an interesting read is *Never Let Me Go*]. The question of whether this ought to be done is, of course, something for moral philosophers (like you) to pick over.

### The universality of human nature and the diversity of individuals.

If we follow on from the previous idea of machines being like humans, then another philosophical issue that presents itself is the question of human diversity. To many, the notion of mass-producing identical copies of 'humans' (I put in the scare quotes because it is a question whether such beings are humans at all) is repelling. The repulsion is generally instinctive - people don't arrive at such a feeling through reasoning about it. Rather, it seems to be a *natural* reaction, rather like the feeling arising from seeing maggots swarming over meat, or the idea of incestuous activity.



That said, we don't usually have the same instinctive feeling when we consider people who are *natural* clones: identical twins and triplets. Or perhaps we do if such people are alike in how they *behave* not just in how they look. I, for one, feel vaguely uneasy when seeing genetically identical people who also dress the same, spend their time together, have the same interests, and so on.

This uneasiness would, I'm sure, be compounded if there were, instead of two or three people like that, two or three thousand people like that - let alone two or three million. If you are like me, why is there this uneasiness about this degree of uniformity?

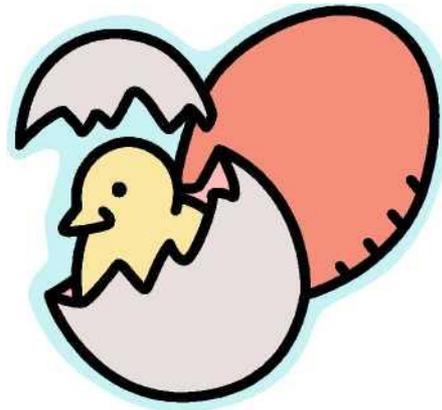
This worry about uniformity seems to contrast with another very common aspiration: to identify oneself with others - very few of us want to be wholly different from other people: we conform. This conformity is not just in the relatively trivial things (like wearing shoes that match each other, for instance), but often appears to be rooted in our nature - just as it is in other social species in the world.

Such considerations bring us to the issue: exploring the tension between having something *in common* with all other human beings, and then there being something totally distinctive about individuals which *sets them apart* from all other human beings. Depending on where you think the emphasis lies can have very influential implications (perhaps especially in political philosophy) on how we see ourselves in relation to others.

Let's start with looking at the evidence for there being a 'human nature' - some characteristic, or set of characteristics, that we all have in common. Starting with the very obvious, we all are a particular sort of mammal, identifiable as a discrete biological species by the genetic, anatomic and physiological features that we have in common. Of course, there are some difficulties with this biological identification because there is variation in such features: even natural clones, though genetically identical, do not have the same fingerprints, or identical brain activity, for instance. The rest of us vary a whole lot more in our genes, bodies and biochemistry.



One way to point up the difficulties with the biological approach is to ask whether a human being must have human parents. It seems to go against nature to answer 'no' to this: how could one species simply give birth to another? [At one time, some biologists maintained that this could happen, that new species were born as 'hopeful monsters' - radically different from their parents but, perhaps, capable of surviving and reproducing with other such 'monsters'. In modern biology this theory has practically no credibility.] On the other hand, evolution tells us that humans arrived on the planet quite recently through natural biological processes: as time went by, there were apes, then ape-men, then humans. Hence, at some point along the line a pair of ape-men parents gave birth to a human child. [Of course, this is a version of the 'chicken-and-egg' problem. The resolution lies in the recognition that drawing biological lines between species is problematic given the continuum that naturally exists. However, that is not to say that real distinctions cannot be made along a continuum. For example, there is a continuum from 'red' to 'green' which passes through 'orange' and 'yellow'. Of course, if we were presented with cards with a particular colour on it which was somewhere between 'orange' and 'yellow' we might well have difficulties in deciding whether this particular orangey yellow (or a yellowish orange) fitted the 'orange' or the 'yellow' category. But just because it is difficult does not mean that we should abandon the categories of 'orange' and 'yellow': they are real categories, as separable from each other as they both are from 'red' and 'green'. In the same way, given the nature of nature (in terms of species), then the category 'ape-men' and 'human' are meaningful even though the distinction between them is not obvious when subjected to scrutiny along the continuum. (And so the egg came before the chicken...)] Thus we might, quite rightly, dismiss the possible contribution of mere biology to the debate as being inadequate without robust philosophical underpinnings for distinguishing our 'nature' - biological or otherwise.



Instead, let's turn to culture to see whether we can establish our commonality of human nature. Taking drama as an example, it certainly seems to be the case that it works because we understand the motives and actions of the characters. Even if the play is set in quite different circumstances (Ancient Greece, for instance, with its pantheon of gods, reverence for heroes, subjection of women, slavery, its wildly varying attitudes to how to live a life) we can empathise with the characters. This act of empathy is only possible because they are like us in how their minds (and/or brains) work. Thus, rather than emphasising our common biology, we can focus on our commonality of feeling about others. Of course, these 'feelings' are a part of our mind and we might also extend this and find commonalities in our reasoning and, perhaps, in our morality (though, of course, details vary a good deal in the latter.) and so identify our 'nature' in terms of the way that we *think* rather than in biological terms.

Having established a degree of agreement about our having a common nature, we can now address the tension between this and what seems to be the necessity of being an individual. For the time I will put to one side the existentialist approach which is dealt with in the Human Condition section. You should remember that existentialists reject out of hand the notion that there is a 'human nature' that is relevant to the vital issue of how we should live our lives. Broadly speaking, the individual is the start and end of everything.

But even without the existentialist approach, there is still dispute about the degree of commonality and individuality that is appropriate to human beings. As an illustration I'll look at just two standpoints on the question but you will quickly see from these that there is a great deal more that could (and has been) said on this issue.

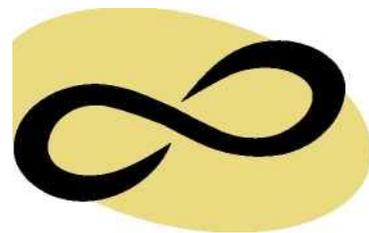
The first position here is probably one which is relatively common in the postEnlightenment world. This regards the individual as central. One might like to trace this back to Descartes who argued that the



individual is the prime focus for knowledge of the world. One might argue that inexorable historical forces have been at work to emancipate the individual from the yoke of authority. One could argue that the power of science has ushered in an atmosphere of scepticism of authority of any stamp and, as a consequence, promoted individualism. Or perhaps our capacity for selfishness has been given a freer rein with increased material wealth. Such possibilities, though not without interest, are more properly addressed in history and social sciences. However, you should appreciate that they do rest on interpretations of human nature that are not necessarily compatible and here, at least, is a role for philosophy. At any event, the emphasis on the individual is a reality. One hears (though I hope one never actually uses) phrases like 'you must be true to yourself and 'just be yourself' which illustrate this focus on the individual as being the object of key importance to what we might call a 'good life'. As a prescription for this way of achieving a good life, the parents must be free to choose how to give birth, which toys they give their children, which schooling they give them, whether to vaccinate them or not. Once adult, a person must be free to choose their job, their lifestyle, their marriage partner (or not), their sexuality, religion and political persuasion. The individual must have choice in all things: holiday destination, soap powder, clothing, type of burial. So far as possible, authority is kept in the background: no-one should be able to constrain an individual's freedom to act (so long as they don't harm other people), the individual should be free to make up their own mind about everything - even the priest might have to take a back seat since the individual may have direct communication with a personal God (as in Christianity, for example).

This cult of the individual emphasises and celebrates our differences from others and grounds its philosophy on the premise that the individual knows best what is best for the individual.

In contrast to this highly individualistic interpretation of what is best for us as a human being, we might consider groups and societies with a quite different interpretation of how to achieve this end. This, if you like, is a more naturalistic approach which attempts to ground the lives of individuals in accordance with how we are rather than how we see ourselves. It rejects the free-thinking, rational, detached individual of the approach above and points to our social nature and our social requirements: we are born into a group (the family) which is a part of a larger group (the community or society) and all our lives are spent in some grouping or other. If you adopt this view, then it is wholly right that individuality is not celebrated or sought after. Everyone born into such a group will know their place within the group.



Thus, if you are male and your father is a blacksmith, you will become the blacksmith. If you are female, you will be a wife and mother, skilled in domesticity. It is right that your parents select a spouse for you; right for your life to be ordered according to custom and tradition: the old ways are the best ways.

Notice how these interpretations of the 'natural' relationships between human beings in a social context can make big differences to the way in which we live our lives. What you need to do yourself is to reflect on the *implications* of taking one or other of such views and find answers to the questions of 'what are you?' and 'how should you live your life?'



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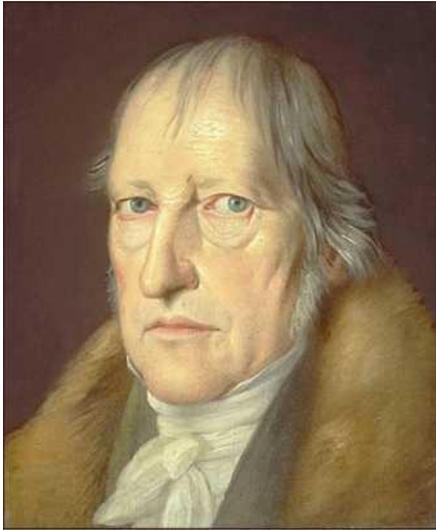
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## Appendix 1: Hegel and Freedom

### Life



Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 - 1831 ) was born and lived in Germany (then a loose confederacy of about 300 states, duchies and free cities linked together as the Holy Roman Empire under the leadership of Francis I of Austria). He lived through the golden age of German literature (Goethe and Schiller were major influences on him) and, in his philosophy, took Kant as his point of departure. Hegel was a tutor in his early adult life but when he inherited on his father's death

(1799) joined his friend Schelling at the University of Jena in the small state of Weimar. He lectured privately for a while and, when the money ran out, published his first major work *The Phenomenology of Mind*. The response was respectful (though Schelling was understandably perturbed to find the preface contained a polemical attack on his views). The University closed down and Hegel became a newspaper editor for a year then a headmaster for another nine. He continued to publish philosophical works and these gained him wider recognition - enough for his appointment to the chair of philosophy at the University of Berlin where he remained until his death. It was in Berlin that proved the climax of his life and, besides publishing several highly-respected works, he

attracted large audiences to hear his views.

### On History

Hegel's theory of history is that it progresses along natural lines - natural in the sense of there being underlying forces causing it to follow the path that it does. In his *Philosophy of History*, besides including a good deal of historical material, he sought to present this raw material of history as part of a rational process of development - thus revealing the meaning and significance of world history. This belief in the meaning and significance of history is central to him.

A straight-forward indication of Hegel's notion of meaning in history comes in his own introduction to the work: 'The history of the world in none other that the progress of the consciousness of freedom.' He justifies this claim by pointing to different stages in the history of humanity. He begins with the 'Oriental World' only to dismiss it as a stagnation, not a part of the sweep of History. For Hegel, true history begins with the Persian Empire.

In the Oriental World, only one person is a free individual: the ruler. All others are totally lacking in freedom because they must subordinate their will to that ruler. This lack of freedom goes very deep. It is not just that the ruler can totally dominate the ruled. It is that the ruled lack the will even to think about whether they should or <sup>18</sup> Distilled from *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction* by **Peter Singer** should not obey the ruler. The ruled have no will of their own. 'Moral' questions do not exist: facts about behaviour are (for the ruled) external, as open to questioning as the existence of mountains and seas.

The difference with Persia was that here rules were not just for the ruled: the ruler also had to obey them. Though the ruler was still the only free man, the fact that his rule was based on a principle rather than being seen as a natural fact about the world, allows some unrestricted thought. Here is the seed for the development of an individual's consciousness of freedom.

The Persian World could not allow the development of individual consciousness of freedom due to its structure. However, this world was defeated by the Greeks (at the battle of Salamis). In the Greek World the separate states that recognized the principle of 'free individuality' vanquished for ever the ambition for a world of the ruled united under just one ruler.



Hegel argues that the freedom of the individual is not fully developed in the Greek World. For one thing, slavery was a part of that world - was *necessary* for that world: while some were exercising rights and duties in public assemblies, others had to do the work of society.

Secondly, even the freedom of the free citizens is incomplete. Hegel claims that the Greeks had no concept of individual conscience. He says that they made their decisions out of habit - automatically taking the side of their own state, for example. They could not conceive of life outside their own state. Behaving out of habit or custom is not free behaviour: one might have done otherwise given a different upbringing. Hegel points out that genuinely free people would not always be consulting oracles or the intestines of sacrificial animals for guidance



Greek Theater Performance

for behaviour - reason should be used and freedom cannot be fully achieved without critical thought and reflection.

Socrates challenged this customary morality by questioning individuals who think they know what the morality consists in but, it turns out, do not. He makes reason, not social custom, the final judge of right and wrong. (And so the Athenians were right to condemn him to death since this challenged the basis of their communal existence.) The principle of independent thought was, by then, well rooted and ultimately led to the downfall of Athens which marks the end of the world-historical role played by the Greek civilization.

The Roman World would appear at first to be a reversion to the Persian-style: a diverse group held together by rigid rules and severe discipline. But for Hegel, reversal is not possible. His argument that the Roman World is an advance lies in the codification of individuals' rights: the freedom of the individual is enshrined in the political and judicial systems. He acknowledges, however, that this is only formal (there is 'abstract right of the individual') and so there is proscription of freedom.

[This state of things led, for Hegel, to a variety of philosophical schools such as Stoicism, Epicureanism and Scepticism which sought to develop an indifference to the harshness of the outside world.]



Christianity offered a more positive solution than retreat in the face of a brutal external coercion. This is because it ushers in the recognition that we are spiritual beings in a very deep sense. This allows us to transcend the hostilities of the natural world towards something more positive beyond it.

According to Hegel, Christianity promotes the development of what he calls 'religious selfconsciousness': a recognition that it is the spiritual world, and not the natural world, that is our true home. For much of the time of the Christian era, however, it was, in Hegel's view decadent: putting a Christian veneer over structures rotten to the core. It was the Reformation (following Luther) that marks the next stage in the progression.

The Germanic World is how Hegel refers to this world in which Reformation occurs. The problem with Christianity before this intervention was that an individual's conscience was still proscribed through it being necessary to get to God via the Church or the Priest. Compliance is required: the individual's spirit is still fettered to the objects of the world. You should note that

'religion' is not central in Hegel's argument - it is that religious practices and all other approaches to our lives are



interrelated and inter-dependent. The free spirit of the Protestant able to communicate directly with his/her God is the same free spirit in the individual's dealings with others and the world.

Since the Reformation, the role of history has been nothing but the transforming of the world in accordance with the essential principle: 'man is in his very nature destined to be free.' This is no small task since it requires all social institutions to be made to conform to general principles of reason. The French Revolution (which occurred when Hegel was 19 years old) was applauded by Hegel but in a qualified way: it did institute reason in social institutions but what it did was ignore the disposition of the people. He saw it as a mistake to apply reason in isolation from an existing community. That said, it gave the world the principles of equality of opportunity, individual rights and freedoms.

This brings Hegel more or less up to date: history has progressed to the state where individuals can govern themselves according to their own conscience and convictions; where the external world can be organised under rational principles. Once this is achieved then the individual will have no restrictions on his/her freedom as there will be perfect harmony between the free choices of individuals and the needs of society as a whole. Then the history of the world will have achieved its goal.

#### Freedom and Community

Hegel's concept of the 'freedom' in his 'consciousness of freedom' was not clearly defined in his *Philosophy of History*. He acknowledged the difficulty involved in any such defining - indeed, thought it best to demonstrate what he meant rather than attempting an exclusive definition. This 'demonstration' was what he aimed for in his book *Philosophy of Right*. [You should note that 'Right' is not just, as in English, about right and wrong i.e. ethics. In German 'right' does have this meaning but also has wider associations, including that of 'the Law'.]

To get to Hegel's concept of freedom, we can first dismiss from it a type of freedom that is known as 'negative freedom'. Negative freedom is the absence of restrictions - no-one interferes with what I want to do, no-one tries to force me to do something. Hegel (unlike liberal thinkers) thought this sort of freedom was secondary. He referred to it as formal (or abstract) freedom: it has the form of freedom but not the substance of it. His objection to this notion of freedom is that it takes the choices of the individual as the basis from which freedom must begin - how and why these choices are made is a question that those who hold this concept of freedom do not ask. Hegel does ask it, and his answer is that the individual choice, considered in isolation from everything else, is the outcome of arbitrary circumstances. Hence it is not genuinely free.

A way to see what he means is to consider an analogous contemporary debate. Some economists believe that the proper test of how well an economic system works is the extent to which it enables people to satisfy their preferences. These economists take individual preferences as the basis from which assessment must begin. They do not ask how these preferences came about. To select among preferences and give some preferences more weight than others (apart from the differing weights given to their preferences by the individuals themselves) would be, these economists say, a blatant attempt to impose one's own values on others by denying them the capacity to decide what they really want out of life.



Such economists might be called 'liberal economists'. Those who might be called 'radical economists' can be critical of the liberal economists. Radical economists ask some questions about how individual preferences are formed before they agree to take such preferences as the sole basis for judging how well an economic system works. They can bring up examples of the following kind: suppose that at a certain time people in our society take the normal human body odours for granted. That humans sweat

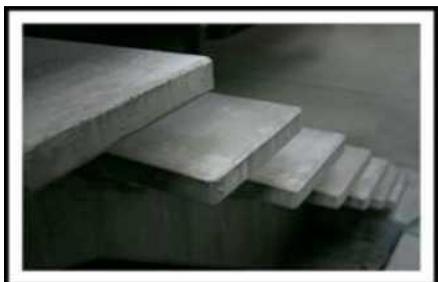


and that it is possible to smell a sweaty person are things they barely notice, and in so far as they do notice them, they do not consider them unpleasant. Then someone discovers a product which has the effect of inhibiting sweat and the odour it gives off. That is an interesting discovery but, in the society described, interest in it will be very limited. Our inventor, however, does not give up easily. He launches a clever advertising campaign designed to make people anxious about whether they sweat more than other people,

and whether their friends might find their body odour offensive. His advertising is successful. People develop a preference for using the new product; and because the product is widely available at a price within their means, they can satisfy this preference. From the standpoint of the liberal economist, all this is fine. That the economy works in this way provides them with no basis for rating it less favourably than they otherwise would have. The radical economists think this is manifestly absurd. To avoid such absurdities, they say, economists must face the difficult task of enquiring into the basis of preferences, and must judge economic systems by their ability to satisfy not just any preferences, but those preferences that are based on genuine human needs or contribute to genuine human welfare. The radical economists concede that if we adopt their method, we cannot claim that our assessment is value-free; but they add that no method of assessing an economic system can be value-free. The method of assessment by liberal economists simply took the satisfaction of existing preferences as its sole value. A value-judgement is therefore implicit in the use of this method, though disguised under the cloak of objectivity. The liberal economists effectively give their blessing to whatever circumstances happen to influence what people prefer.

There is a clear parallel between this debate and Hegel's debate with those who define freedom as the ability to do what we please. This negative concept of freedom is like the liberal economists' conception of a good economic system: it refuses to ask what influences form the 'pleasings' that we act upon when we are free to do as we please. Those who hold this concept of freedom assert that to ask such a question, and to use the answers as a basis for sorting out genuinely free choices from those that are free only in form and not in substance, would be to write one's own values into the conception of freedom. Hegel's retort, like that of the radical economists, would be that the negative conception of freedom is already based on a value, the value of action based on choice, no matter how the choice is reached or how arbitrary it may be. The negative conception of freedom, in other words, gives its blessing to whatever circumstances happen to be influencing the way people choose.

If you agree that it is absurd to see no objection to an economic system that artificially creates new preferences so that some may profit by satisfying them, you must agree that the radical economists have a point. Admittedly it will be difficult to sort out the preferences which contribute to genuine human welfare from those that do not. It may prove impossible to reach agreement on this. Nevertheless, the difficulty of the task is no reason for taking all preferences at face value.



If you agree that the radical economists have a point, it is only a small step to agreeing that Hegel has a point. Indeed, it is no step at all given that the grounds for economic preferences and our freedom to choose in other spheres consist in 'satisfaction of wants/desires'. Hegel never loses sight of the fact that our wants and desires are shaped by the society in which we live, and that this society in turn is a stage in a historical process. Hence abstract freedom, the freedom to do as we please, is effectively the freedom to be pushed to and fro by the social

and historical forces of our times.

As a criticism of the negative concept of freedom, Hegel's view should by now seem reasonable enough. We might now ask what he intends to put in its place. We all must live in a particular society at a particular period of history: how then can freedom be anything more than the freedom to act as we are led to act by social and historical forces?

Hegel's answer develops from a consideration of freedom and duty. Some of our desires are products of our nature - like eating, or sexual desire. Many of our other desires are formed by our upbringing, our education, our society, our environment generally. Whether these desires are biological or social, it is true in either case that we did not choose them and, since we did not choose them, we are not free when we act from desire.

If we are not free when we act from desires, it seems the only possible path to freedom is to purge oneself of all desires. But what would then be left? Kant's answer is: reason. When we take away all particular desires, even the most basic ones, we are left with the bare, formal element of rationality, and this bare formal element is the universal form of the moral law itself. This is Kant's famous

'categorical imperative' and leads to the conclusion that motivations for actions should be in accordance with a universal law. In other words, to do one's duty - or, since the modern notion of 'duty' often includes the idea of obedience to rules (which seems the opposite of freedom) - to follow one's conscience ('conscience' not in the sense of an 'inner voice' which is socially conditioned, but in the sense of being based on a rational acceptance of the categorical imperative as the supreme moral law). Put this way, we might accept it as having some merit: freedom of conscience is, after all, widely recognized as an essential part of what we take freedom to be, even if it is not the whole of it.

Hegel agrees with much of Kant's analysis - particularly the idea that freedom is essentially universal; that freedom is to be found in what is universal. For Hegel, doing one's duty is a notable advance on the negative idea of freedom as doing what we please. However, he is also one of Kant's most trenchant critics with two main objections to his theory.

The first is that Kant's theory never gets down to specifics about what we should do. This is not because Kant lacked interest in specifics but a result of his insistence that morality must be based on pure practical reasoning, free from any particular motives. As a result, the theory can yield only the bare, universal form of the moral law; it cannot tell us what our specific duties are. This universal form is, Hegel says, simply a principle of consistency or non-contradiction. If we have no point to start from, it cannot get us anywhere. For example, if we accept the validity of property, theft is inconsistent; but we can deny that property gives rise to any rights and be perfectly consistent





thieves. If the directive 'Act so as not to contradict yourself!' is the only thing we have to move us to act, we may find ourselves doing nothing at all.

Kant cannot be rescued by permitting us to start from our desires and only allowing them if they can be put in universal form. Hegel points out that any desire can be put in a universal form - and hence any 'perverse' desire becomes permissible.

Hegel's second major objection to Kant is that the Kantian position divides man against himself, locks reason in an eternal conflict with desire, and denies the natural side of man any right to satisfaction.

Our natural desires are merely something to be suppressed, and Kant gives to reason the arduous, if not impossible task, of suppressing them. He (Kant) leaves unanswered the question 'Why should I be moral?' Indeed, in Kant's system it is unanswerable since to even raise it as a question is

ruled out: we are told to do our duty for its own sake, and to ask for any other reason is to depart from the pure and free motivation morality demands.

Hegel applauded Kant in his making an advance in that his system contributed towards the increase in freedom of modern man (by breaking down barriers of 'customary' thinking). What he sought was to unite Kant's 'free conscience' base of reason with the 'natural satisfaction' of human desires.

He found the unity of individual satisfaction and freedom in the individual's conformity to the social ethos of an organic community. The 'organic community' Hegel had in mind is perhaps best expressed in the words of F H Bradley (a British philosophy who adopted many of Hegel's views). He describes the development of a child growing up in such a community:

The child...is born...into a living world...He does not even think of his separate self; he grows with his world, his mind fills and orders itself; and when he can separate himself from that world, and know himself apart from it, then by that time his self, the object of his self-consciousness, is penetrated, infected, characterized by the existence of others. Its content implies in every fibre relations of community. He learns, or already perhaps has learnt, to speak, and here he appropriates the common heritage of his race, the tongue that he makes his own is his country's language, it is the same that others speak, and it carries into his mind the ideas and sentiments of the race and stamps them in indelibly. He grows up in an atmosphere of example and general custom... The soul within him is saturated, is filled, is qualified by; it has assimilated, has got its substance, has built itself up from; it is one and the same life with the universal life, and if he turns against this he turns against himself.

Bradley's point, and Hegel's, is that because our needs and desires are shaped by society, an organic community fosters those desires that most benefit the community; moreover, it so imbues its members with the sense that their own identity consists in being a part of the community that they will no more think of going off in pursuit of their own private interests than one part of an organism's body (the arm, say) would think of hiving off to find something better to do with itself. Nor should we forget



that there is reciprocity: just as arm and body need each other, so an organic community and the individuals within it need each other.

Hegel's community consists of individuals aware of their capacity for freedom and their ability to make their own decisions in accordance with their conscience. Free-thinking beings will only give their allegiance to institutions that they recognize as conforming to rational principles (hence modern communities are based on principles of reason).



Hegel had already identified the result of striking down irrational institutions and building a state on purely rational principles: the French Revolution which was the political embodiment of the mistake Kant made in his purely abstract

and universal conception of duty, which would not tolerate the natural side of

human beings. The result of the

Revolution was the Terror where, in Hegel's analysis, the bare universal comes into conflict with the individual and negates him: the state sees individuals as its enemies and puts them to death.

A modern parallel to illustrate why Hegel regarded the French Revolution as a 'glorious failure' would be the sort of town planning employed in Britain in the 1950s to the 1980s. When people first started living in towns, no thought was given to planning: buildings were put up wherever it was convenient and this gave a higgledy-piggledy mix of shops, homes, factories and so on. Then someone came along and pointed out how all this was no good - that we should plan our towns to make them more sensible: the factories near the main road and rail arteries; the shops all together with ample parking spaces nearby; homes in areas of open parkland; and so on. This notion led to the clearing of many old-style areas and replacing them with 'properly planned' ones - even the creation of 'new towns' constructed on reasonable principles. The town-planners, to their surprise, have not been universally acclaimed as wonderful. In fact, people complained that their high-rise flat didn't allow them to easily play with their children on the lawns far below; that they missed their quirky local shop; that it was too far to walk to the shopping malls and the extra traffic caused choked roads - and because no-one walked anymore, the streets and wide open grassy areas were no longer safe to be in at night (and even during daylight hours). More recent planning of towns attempts to incorporate the attractive features of the old unplanned towns: narrow, crooked streets that discourage traffic and encourage walking; the convenience of having shops and homes - even small factories - all together.

The old town-planners are like the Revolutionaries; the newer ones like Hegelians: made wiser by the past and ready to find rationality in a world that is the result of practical adaptation rather than deliberate planning.

Hegel was concerned with freedom in a deep metaphysical sense - in the sense that we are free only when we are able to choose without being coerced either by human beings or by our natural desires, or by social circumstances.



We can only be free when we choose rationally, and we choose rationally only when we choose in accordance with universal principles. If these choices are to bring us the satisfaction which is our due, the universal principles must be embodied in an organic community organized along rational lines. In such a community individual interests and the interests of the whole are in harmony. In choosing to do my duty I choose freely because I choose rationally, and I achieve my own fulfilment in serving the objective form of the universal, namely the state. Moreover (and here is the remedy for the second great defect in Kantian ethics), because the universal law is embodied in the concrete institutions of the state, it ceases to be abstract and empty. It prescribes to me the specific duties of my station and role in the community.

It may be that Hegel's description of the 'organic community' is wrong. But this does not invalidate his conception of freedom. He was seeking to describe a community in which individual interests and the interests of the whole are in harmony. It may be that his concept does not exist - *could not* exist. Even so, it may serve as an ideal.

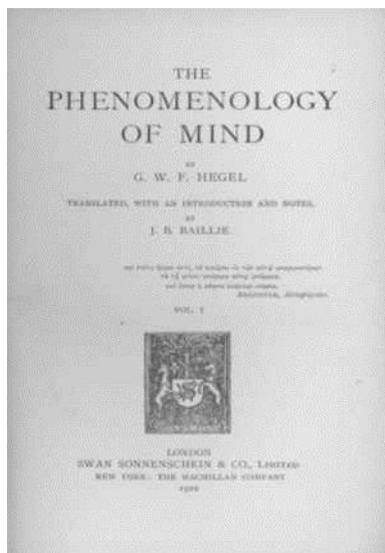
It is worth noting that Hegel could not be described as a liberal in the modern sense. For example, he thought that universal suffrage was a bad idea and that there should be restriction on freedom of expression. His reason for rejecting unrestricted voting was that the populace would vote in accordance with their material interests or with the capricious and even whimsical likes and dislikes they form for one candidate rather than another (and if he could witness a modern British election he would not change his mind). Hegel, remember, thought impulsive or arbitrary acts were not free acts - we only act freely when our choices are based on reason. To make the running of the state dependent on anything as arbitrary as the whims of individuals is tantamount to having it run by chance. This is not rational.

Popper described Hegel as a supporter of totalitarianism. His case seems a strong one. Because even if rational choice is the basis of freedom, who is to say what is rational? A dictator could decree the suppression of all opposed to his own rational plans for the future of the state. In such a state, suppression of newspapers and leaflets opposed to the dictator would be acceptable; arresting opponents would be acceptable; closing down churches and replacing them with more rational forms of worship would be acceptable: only when the poor misguided people come to appreciate the rationality of the dictator's plans will they be truly free! If this really is Hegel's concept of freedom then Popper is right.

However, Hegel has some defence. The first thing to appreciate is that was not seeing the 'state' as being something separate from the individuals that make it up. For Hegel, the 'state' is simply all social life - so when he calls on the state as being something to worship, for instance, he means to glorify not the government but the community as a whole. He also defended freedom of speech, trial by jury and lauded the idea of a constitutional monarchy as the best form of government. So perhaps he is not as totalitarian as Popper insisted.

### Geist

Up to now, we have ignored a concept which is absolutely crucial for Hegel's philosophical system: *geist*. This word is troublesome for the translator since, in German, it can refer to 'mind' and to 'spirit' depending on the context in which it is used - and in English the latter is often associated with something intangible, even supernatural. Like Hegel himself, it is probably best to allow what he means by the term to emerge from his discussion of its role in the world.



First of all, we can investigate a question that is important in Hegel's account of history: why is the history of the world nothing but the progress of the consciousness of freedom? Remember that, for Hegel, there is nothing accidental about the course of history: the way it has developed has been *necessary*. His reason for making this surprising claim is because he saw history as nothing but the progress of the consciousness of freedom and this as nothing but the development of *geist*. The argument for this emerges from one of the densest philosophical works ever published: *The Phenomenology of Mind*. It emerges as a by-product of his investigation into what the mind can know.

Here is the gist of Hegelian metaphysics. Phenomenology is the study of the way in which things appear to us. Hegel sought to investigate how the mind appears to itself. His approach was to trace different forms of consciousness, viewing each one 'from inside' and showing how more limited forms of consciousness necessarily develop into more adequate ones. He saw consciousness developing towards ever-better forms - forms that have a greater grasp of reality. Ultimately, there will be a total grasping of reality -

what he called 'absolute knowledge'.

A major difficulty at the outset is that what we use to think about the mind is the mind. How can we know that this instrument is not distorting reality? Hegel rejects the sceptical position which can result from this. For one thing, scepticism is self-refuting (the claim of scepticism is itself a claim of knowledge - which scepticism disallows). For another thing, scepticism has its own presuppositions: there is a reality and our instrument for knowing is inadequate (this presupposes a distinction between 'reality' and ourselves); worse still, it takes for granted that our knowledge and reality are cut off from one another, but at the same time treats our knowledge as something real, that is, part of reality.

Hegel's main target in this analysis is Kant. He (Kant) argued that we can never see reality as it is, for we can only comprehend our experiences within the frameworks of space, time and causation. These latter are not part of reality but the necessary forms in which we grasp it; therefore we can never know things as they are independently of our knowledge. Hegel disagreed:

We ought, says Kant, to become acquainted with the instrument before we undertake the work for which it is employed; for if the instrument be insufficient, all our trouble will be spent in vain...But the examination of knowledge can only be carried out by an act of knowledge. To examine this so-called instrument is the same thing as to know it. But to seek to know before we know is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus, not to venture into the water until he had learned to swim.



The lesson taught by the folly of Scholasticus is clear. To learn to swim we must plunge boldly into the stream; and to obtain knowledge of reality, we must plunge boldly in the stream of consciousness that is the starting point of all we know. The only possible approach to knowledge is an examination of consciousness 'from the inside' - in other words, a phenomenology of mind. What Hegel proposes is not to start with sophisticated doubts, but with a simple form of consciousness that takes itself to be genuine knowledge. This simple form of consciousness will, however, prove itself to be something less than genuine knowledge and so will develop into another form of consciousness; and this in turn will

prove inadequate and develop into something else, and so the process will continue until we reach true knowledge.



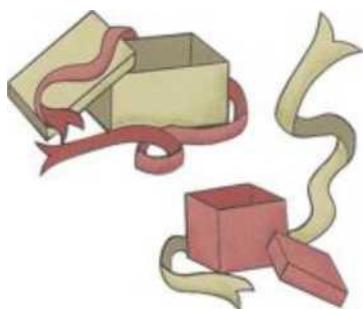
He traces this progression in detail in *The Phenomenology of Mind*. He says that each form of consciousness necessarily follows from the previous one. When a prior form shows itself to be less than genuine knowledge, this is what he calls a 'determinate negation': 'determinate' in the sense that it is necessary and 'negation' in the sense that it shows the prior form to be wanting. The new form of consciousness will again be shown to be wanting, and so on, until genuine knowledge is achieved - what he calls 'the absolute'.

His starting point is the most primitive form of consciousness, what he calls 'sense-certainty'. An example would be seeing the table in front of you but grasping nothing else about it (perhaps as an insect, say, would experience it). Sense-certainty simply records the data received by the senses. It makes no effort to classify the data - so it would not 'know' that it was 'wooden' or 'rectangular' or 'brown' since these terms classify the properties of the table.

Sense-certainty has a strong claim to being genuine knowledge but this claim is unfounded. As soon as sense-certainty attempts to utter its 'knowledge' it becomes incoherent. This is because to express the 'knowledge' it must use the concepts of classification - and this requires another sort of 'knowing' that is not simply derived from sense-data. This other form of knowing is the knowledge of universals - 'wooden', 'rectangular', 'brown' are terms that are abstractions from the concrete world of the particular. Hence, he argues, knowledge is impossible without universal concepts. (To the objection that language is not necessary for knowledge he argues that if something cannot be expressed then it cannot be knowledge since what cannot be expressed is purely subjective, a personal opinion: opinion is not knowledge.)

This example demonstrates Hegel's system: sense-certainty claims to represent genuine knowledge; the attempt to articulate this fails; hence sense-certainty is inadequate. As Hegel says, it is shown to be inadequate not by its falling to an alternative interpretation of knowledge, but by taking its claims at face-value and trying to make them more precise, but then seeing its incoherence. The result is not something negative because we have reached a more sophisticated position: knowledge must also involve the mind's active application of classification using universals on the data derived from the senses.

This more sophisticated form of consciousness is then confronted with the degree of reality of its system of classifying. Hegel took Newton's laws as an example. These laws are initially taken to be a part of the reality they are describing but are then recognised as mere constructs that are not, in fact, part of reality, merely convenient ways of making data more comprehensible. In other words, here we can recognise another stage in the development of consciousness: when consciousness attempts to understand its own creations. Here we have a latent self-consciousness.



At this point, Hegel now focuses on the development of this latent self-consciousness into fully explicit self-consciousness and drops the direct investigation into knowledge. He says that self-consciousness cannot exist in isolation: if it is to form a proper picture of itself, it needs some contrast. It requires some object from which to differentiate itself. I can only become aware of myself if I am also aware of something that is not myself.

Although self-consciousness needs an object outside itself, this external object is also something foreign to it, and a form of opposition to it. The relationship between these two comes to the surface in the form of desire. To desire something is to wish to possess it (thus not to destroy it altogether) but also to transform it into something that is yours, to strip away its foreignness.

Desire appeared as the expression of the fact that self-consciousness needs an external object, and yet finds itself limited by anything that is outside itself. To desire something is to be unsatisfied. Indeed, self-consciousness seems doomed to permanent dissatisfaction for if the object of desire is done away with as an independent object, self-consciousness will have destroyed what it needs for its own existence.



Hegel's solution to this dilemma is to make the object of self-consciousness another self-consciousness. Each has an 'object' with which to contrast itself but this 'object' is not something which can be possessed and 'negated' as an external object, but is another self-consciousness which can possess itself, and thereby do away with itself as an external object.

If this seems obscure, don't worry. It is even more obscure in the original. One expert on Hegel (Richard Norman) says of this part of the book 'since I find large parts of it unintelligible,

I shall say little about it'. Hegel's central point to cling to is that self-consciousness demands not simply any external object, but another self-consciousness. Perhaps a simple illustration is to say that to see oneself one needs a mirror. To be aware of oneself as a self-conscious being, one needs to observe another self-conscious being, to see what self-consciousness is like.

An alternative explanation is that self-consciousness can only develop in the context of social interaction. A child growing up apart from all other self-conscious beings would never develop beyond the level of mere consciousness. Either of these explanations is plausible enough. However, as Singer says, it is difficult to relate either of them to the words Hegel uses.

#### Master and slave

We now get to the most admired section of the entire *Phenomenology*. The two self-consciousnesses are on stage. Each self-consciousness (s-c) needs the other to establish his own awareness of himself. Hegel suggests that what each s-c requires from the other is acknowledgement or recognition: without the recognition from the other, one's self-assurance is impossible. An analogy which might help is the diplomatic recognition of a state. That this diplomatic recognition is important can be seen from the efforts states (such as China) make to achieve it - and the efforts other states will make to deny it to them. The peculiarity of diplomatic recognition is that on the one hand it does nothing more than recognize something that is already in existence, and yet on the other hand it makes something less than a state into a complete state. The same peculiarity belongs to Hegel's conception of recognition.

The demand for recognition is mutual and one might think that a peaceful agreement about it could easily be met. Hegel says not. He tells us that the s-c seeks to become pure, and to do this it must show that it is not attached to mere material objects. But it is attached to its own living body, and to the other living body of the other s-c from whom it requires recognition. The way to prove that one is not attached to either of these material objects is to engage in a life-and-death struggle with the other s-c: by seeking to kill the other, one shows that one is not dependent on the body of the other, and by risking one's life, one shows one is not attached to one's own body either. Hence, the initial relationship of the two s-c's is combat.

However, a moment's reflection reveals that either s-c's death suits neither: the dead, obviously, the victor because then the s-c can no longer get recognition needed to confirm his sense of himself as a person. The victor therefore spares the defeated but the original equality between them is no longer extant: the victor is independent (the master) and the defeated the dependent (the slave).

This is how Hegel accounts for the ruler and the ruled but, once again, this situation is not stable. At first, it seems as if the master has everything he needs and can relax to enjoy the fruits of the slave's labours. But wait, the master

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still needs the acknowledgement to be fulfilled. The slave gives this acknowledgement but to the master the slave is merely a thing, not an independent consciousness at all. Thus the master fails to achieve the acknowledgement he requires.

Nor is the situation of the slave as it first appears to be. The slave lacks adequate acknowledgement, of course, for the master he is a mere thing. On the other hand, the slave works in the external world. In contrast to his master, who receives the temporary satisfactions of consumption, the slave shapes and fashions the material objects on which he works. In doing so he makes his ideas into something permanent. Since our actions, our products, tell us more about ourselves than mere introspection, the slave becomes more aware of his own consciousness. In labour, the slave discovers that he has a mind of his own.



This master-slave relationship fits into Hegel's historical account as a parallel with slave states (such as the Persian and the Greek Worlds). He points out that in the subsequent Roman World the philosophy of Stoicism arose - with two of its leaders being Marcus Aurelius (the emperor) and Epictetus (a slave). Stoicism teaches withdrawal from the world and a retreat into one's own consciousness. The weakness of this is that thought, when cut off from the real world, lacks all determinate content. Its edifying ideas are barren of substance and soon get tedious. Stoicism is then succeeded by scepticism, and from scepticism we progress to what Hegel calls 'the unhappy consciousness'. This is the one that existed under Christianity. He also calls it 'the alienated soul' and what he has in mind is this. In the alienated soul the dualism of master and slave is concentrated into one consciousness, but the two elements are not unified. The unhappy consciousness aspires to be independent of the physical world, to resemble God and be eternal and purely spiritual; yet at the same time it recognizes that it is a part of the material world, that its physical desires are real and inescapable. Thus it is divided against itself.

This state of being an unhappy consciousness is within all religions which divide human nature against itself - which, he says, is any religion which separates God from man, putting God in a 'beyond' outside the human world. What is needed is the realization that the spiritual qualities of God which it worships are in fact qualities of *its own self*. (It is difficult to see from this why Hegel was a member of the Lutheran Church.)

Finally, Hegel points out that knowledge of the absolute comes with his philosophy. And knowledge of the absolute is one and the same with freedom of consciousness. The mind has developed throughout history to become free. Mind must be in control of everything else, and must know that it is in control. This does not mean (as it did for Kant) that the non-intellectual side of nature is simply to be suppressed. Hegel gives our naturally and socially-conditioned desires their place, as he gives traditional political institutions their place; but it is always a place within a hierarchy ordered and controlled by the mind.



The kind of freedom Hegel believes to be genuine is to be found in rational choice. Reason is the essential nature of the intellect. A free mind, unimpeded by coercion of any sort, will follow reason as easily as a river unimpeded by mountains or hills will flow directly to the sea. Anything that is an obstacle to reason is a limitation on the freedom of the mind. Mind controls everything when everything is rationally ordered.

Since reason is inherently universal, mind is inherently universal. Particular human minds are linked because they share a common universal reason: they are aspects of a universal mind. The great obstacle to freedom is that this is not recognized by the individual minds themselves. But mind progresses by chipping away at this obstacle. At last, with Hegel's

philosophy, we see why freedom and knowledge are one and the same: to be free we must be fully aware of the rational and hence universal nature of the intellect.

### Absolute knowledge

Self-knowledge (which includes that consciousness of freedom that is the goal of history) is described by Hegel as absolute knowledge. First of all, by this he does not mean knowing everything. All he wanted to show was how real knowledge is possible. A second misconception about the term requires reference to what Hegel conceived of as the ultimate reality. He described himself as an 'absolute idealist'.

By this he meant that he considered ideas (or, more broadly, thoughts, minds, consciousness) as constituting the ultimate reality: knowledge of the world requires the constructs of consciousness. Hegel poured scorn on concepts of knowledge as come kind of instrument for grasping reality, or as a medium through which we view reality. All these conceptions, he said, divide knowledge from reality. Instead, he proposed that he could reach a point 'where knowledge is no longer compelled to go beyond itself, where reality will no longer be an unknowable 'beyond', but instead mind will know reality directly and be at one with it. Thus, he meant that absolute knowledge is reached when the mind realizes that *what it seeks to know is itself*.

This point is the key to understanding the *Phenomenology* as a whole and is one of Hegel's most profound ideas. The answer to when history ends, when this knowledge of the absolute is achieved is when Hegel's own mind grasps the nature of the universe. As Singer says, there can scarcely be a more momentous conclusion to a work of philosophy.

### Criticisms

The first is aimed at his idealism. Granted that the consciousness shapes reality but, nonetheless, there remains the nagging conviction that there is something 'out there' on which the consciousness does its shaping. Though Hegel can deny the stuff 'out there' is knowledge, he cannot deny the suggestion that something exists outside mind itself.

A second objection comes from idealists who claim that idealism is subjective. Hegel rejects this subjectivism on the grounds that there is only one reality because, ultimately, there is only one mind. Which brings us back to what he meant by *geist*. Now it seems that what he was referring to was something much more spiritual, some supernatural community of 'minds'.



It is difficult to find anything definite about this in Hegel's writings. On the one hand, a cosmic, single 'mind' could be identified with God (in the more Eastern tradition of 'All is One') - and all our individual 'minds' will be incapable of each knowing the absolute since we can only know our little corner, and must necessarily be unaware of the practical creations of other 'minds' which are the key to knowledge. This might come from the necessity, for Hegel, of knowledge being communicable: through language and a rationally organized community 'minds' exist together rather than as separate atoms. Further, he regarded reason as essentially universal and hence, if 'individual' minds operated reasonably, they would all be thinking the same about the same things.

### Aftermath

After his death, his followers split into two camps. The Right Hegelians followed the style of his later years, reconciled his views with Protestantism and accepted his generally positive view of the Prussian state. However, this did not find favour and, by the 1860's Hegel's philosophy was totally out of fashion in Germany.



The Young, or Left, Hegelians took Hegel to what they saw as the logical conclusion of his philosophy: a rejection of Christianity and the acknowledgement that the Prussian state was not the culmination of history in Hegel's 'organic community'. They demanded a better world, where opposition between individual and society would be at an end, a rational world with genuine freedom. They thought such a world was a necessary consequence of the development of history. Their radical vision of such a world saw religion as an obstacle (via Hegel's notion of the 'unhappy consciousness'), as an alienating process by positing all-powerful God and puny Man. The leading Left Hegelian, Ludwig Feuerbach, not only wrote about how Christianity stemmed from psychology [translated into English by Marian Evans aka George Eliot], he was even more radical in his inversion of Hegel. Hegel had given ideas the fundamental position in his analysis of knowledge. Feuerbach argued that being was not derived from thought, but the opposite: mind has its true basis in man. Hence Hegel's philosophy is itself an alienation, requiring to be reacted against through, for him, a science that studies people in their real lives.

Marx attached himself to the Left Hegelians when at the University of Berlin (where he went 6 years after Hegel's death). He responded to Feuerbach's call to go beyond the realm of thought by applying Hegel's dialectical notion to labour: to achieve the liberation of humanity, abolition of alienation of labour was necessary. This requires the abolition of private property and the wage system that goes with it. In other words, to institute communism.

