Can Ethics Provide Answers?

An

Other Essays in Moral Philosophy

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Preface

"Philosophy recovers itself," said John Dewey, "when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men."[1] By this standard, moral philosophy made a remarkable recovery starting around 1970. In the mid-1960s, when I was a graduate student, philosophy was understood by its practitioners to be a technical subject that dealt with questions of logical analysis. Moral philosophers discussed such matters as the meaning of ethical language and whether evaluative conclusions could be derived from factual premises, but they studiously avoided questions about how people should live. "Philosophers are not priests or guidance counselors," it was said. Despite Dewey's admonition, delivered in 1917, this was the prevailing orthodoxy for most of the twentieth century.

Looking back on this period, many commentators pronounce it a sterile and unproductive time for philosophical ethics. I do not share that view. Useful advances were made on many fronts, and some issues, such as the relation between moral judgment and the emotions, came to be understood better than ever before. Nonetheless, "the problems of men," as Dewey put it, were notably absent from most philosophical writing. Then, around 1970, a number of things happened, seemingly all at once: Daniel Callahan founded the Hastings Center, which was to become the preeminent think tank for issues in biomedical ethics; the journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs* was launched, with its inaugural issue featuring papers on abortion, war, draft resistance, and social class; and John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* appeared, a book that would provide a new model for how moral philosophy could be pursued. The field was transformed, and philosophers began to write about virtually every controversial issue of the day. Celebrating the change, it was commonly said that philosophy had "returned to its historic mission" of providing guidance for life. But this comment understated the novelty of what was happening. The new literature in "applied ethics" had no real precedent. One could, of course, find discussions of practical issues in the writings of the great philosophers. But

those discussions were mostly scattered and brief, sidelights to more important business. By contrast, in the 1970s philosophers began to produce a torrent of work on such issues. Never had such detailed attention been paid to the philosophical aspects of so many moral problems.[2]

The essays in this book were written starting in 1970, and they deal with a variety of practical matters. But unlike some who work in this area, I do not believe that "applied ethics" can profitably be pursued apart from the concerns of ethical theory. The relation between applied ethics and ethical theory is not that one "applies" the theory to the practical issue. Rather, it is that in dealing with practical problems, one encounters all sorts of theoretical issues that must be addressed before one can make progress. Richard Hare has said that it was his desire to solve practical problems that first got him interested in philosophy; for me it was the reverse—I was attracted to the study of practical issues because they involve such intriguing philosophical questions. The controversy over euthanasia, for example, involves such theoretical questions as: What is a human life, and why does it have such value? Does a person's life have any objective value, apart from the value it has for us? How far should a person's autonomy extend? Is there an important moral difference between acts and omissions? Is a person's intention relevant to assessing the rightness of an action? And thinking about the controversy over animal rights requires us to examine perhaps the deepest assumption in all of ethics—that promoting *human* interests is the point of the whole moral scheme.

But there is a larger subject that each of these essays addresses in its own way, namely, the nature of ethics and ethical reasoning. We want to know, most fundamentally, what ethics is and whether ethical questions can be answered by rational methods; and if so, what those methods are. Here it is especially important to consider theoretical and practical issues side by side. The practical discussions provide data about how ethical reasoning actually works. It is no good to say, in your theoretical discussion, that ethical reasoning has such-and-such character, if in your practical discussions you engage in reasoning that isn't like that at all. Thus the essays include a large number of practical examples that are of interest not only for their own sakes but also for what they reveal about the nature of ethical thinking.

I did not, in the beginning, set out to champion any large-scale ethical theory. I believed, instead, that each issue could be addressed on its own terms, using whatever intellectual resources were handy. But over the years, I noticed that my conclusions always seemed congenial to utilitarianism. When I wrote about famine relief, I concluded that we have an extensive duty to use our resources to help those in need; when I wrote

about euthanasia, I concluded that it is justified to put an end to suffering; and when I wrote about animals, I ended up agreeing with Bentham that their suffering counts equally with our own. I even defended one of utilitariansm's most scandalous implications, that our duty to our own children is not fundamentally different from our duty to all children. In the meantime, however, my considered opinion about utilitarianism was that it is false because it cannot account for our duty to treat people according to their individual deserts.

Why balk at this, you might ask, after having swallowed so much else? Now I believe I was probably wrong to insist on an independent principle of desert. While I was revising chapter 12 for this collection, I was especially concerned to get clear *why* it is important to treat people as they deserve. I had always believed the answer would be nonutilitarian in character. But as it turned out, the answer—to simplify matters greatly—is that people are better off under a system of norms that acknowledges desert than they would be under a system that does not. The justification for acknowledging deserts, like so many other moral justifications, turns out to be just the sort we would expect utilitarianism to provide. So perhaps I should stop correcting people who remark that these essays are the work of a utilitarian. Instead, perhaps I should say that they record my progress toward that view. Utilitarianism is the position I seem to have ended up with, as the result of thinking about a lot of different issues, even though I never aimed at any such destination.

Notes

1. John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924,* vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 46.

2. In 1969 I set out to edit a book (*Moral Problems* [New York: Harper & Row, 1971]) that would bring together previously published essays by contemporary philosophers on practical issues. Although I collected everything I could find, it wasn't enough to fill the book, and I had to include some essays that were only marginally concerned with practical issues and some by nonphilosophers. On abortion, for example, philosophers had written almost nothing. (Two topics were exceptions: there was a lot of writing about criminal punishment, because it was a test case for utilitarianism; and a number of articles about civil disobedience had been inspired by the civil rights movement. But I couldn't fill the book with essays about just those topics.) Happily, Sara Ruddick helped by writing a splendid new piece for the book, in the process becoming one of the first philosophers to write about sex. By the mid-1970s there were many books like *Moral Problems,* and editors could choose from among hundreds of suitable essays. Such books have been staples of undergraduate ethics instruction ever since.

Acknowledgments

The essays in this collection appeared in earlier forms in various books and journals. None of them is reprinted in precisely its original form. Every writer, looking back at previously published work, sees things he wishes he could change. I have happily made some of those changes.

1. "Moral Philosophy as a Subversive Activity" first appeared in *Applied Ethics: A Reader,* edited by Earl Winkler and Jerrold R. Coombs (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 110–30. Reprinted by permission.

2. "Can Ethics Provide Answers?" is a substantially revised version of a paper that appeared in the *Hastings Center Report* (June 1980): 32–40. Reproduced by permission. © The Hastings Center.

3. "John Dewey and the Truth about Ethics" is from *New Studies in the Philosophy of John Dewey,* edited by Steven M. Cahn (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1977), 149–71. Reprinted by permission.

4. "Active and Passive Euthanasia" was originally published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* 292 (1975), 78–80. © 1975 Massachusetts Medical Society. Reprinted by permission.

5. "Killing, Letting Die, and the Value of Life" appeared, in Italian translation, in *Bioethica: Revista Interdisciplinare* 2 (1993): 271–83. Reprinted by permission.

6. "Do Animals Have Rights?" incorporates parts of two previously published papers: "Do Animals Have a Right to Liberty?" in *Animal Rights and Human Obligations,* edited by Peter Singer and Tom Regan (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 205–23; and "Do Animals Have a Right to Life?" in *Ethics and Animals,* edited by Harlan B. Miller and William H. Williams (Clifton, N.J.: Humana Press, 1983) 275–84. Reprinted by permission.

7. "The Moral Argument for Vegetarianism" incorporates parts of "Vegetarianism and 'The Other Weight Problem,'" in *World Hunger and Moral Obligation*, edited by William Aiken and Hugh LaFollette (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977) 180–93; and "Do Animals Have a Right to Life?" Reprinted by permission.

8. "God and Moral Autonomy" appeared under the title "God and Human Attitudes" in *Religious Studies* 7 (1971): 325–37. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

9. "Lying and the Ethics of Absolute Rules" is a revised version of "On Moral Absolutism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 48 (1970): 338–53. Reprinted by permission.

10. "Why Privacy Is Important" appeared in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 4 (1975): 323–33. Reprinted by permission.

11. "Reflections on the Idea of Equality" is from *On the Track of Reason: Essays in Honor of Kai Nielsen*, edited by Rodger Beehler, David Copp, and Bela Szabados (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), 1–18. Reprinted by permission.

12. "What People Deserve" first appeared in *Justice and Economic Distribution*, edited by John Arthur and William H. Shaw (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 150–63. Reprinted by permission. However, the version that appears here has been so extensively revised and expanded that it is virtually a new paper.

13. "Coping with Prejudice" is an expanded version of an argument from "Prejudice and Equal Treatment," in *Ethical Issues in Contemporary Society*, edited by John Howie and George Schedler (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 54–77. Reprinted by permission.

14. "Morality, Parents, and Children" is from *Person to Person*, edited by George Graham and Hugh LaFollette (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 46–62. Reprinted by permission.

15. "When Philosophers Shoot from the Hip" appeared in *Bioethics* 5 (1991): 67–71, but it was originally the concluding section of "Moral Philosophy as a Subversive Activity."

Contents

Moral Philosophy as a Subversive Activity

Pyrrho, an uncommonly adventurous philosopher of the third century B.C., accompanied the army of Alexander the Great to India, where he and his teacher Anaxarchus became the first Western thinkers to encounter the philosophers of the East. We are told by Diogenes that Pyrrho met with the Indian Gymnosophists (literally, the "naked sophists") and from them he learned "a most noble philosophy," taking the form of agnosticism not only about the gods but about all matters whatsoever. Pyrrho soon came to believe that we cannot know anything at all. In ethics, he said, we cannot know anything because there is nothing to know. He held that "Nothing was honorable or dishonorable, just or unjust. And so, universally, he held that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action; for no single thing is any more this than that."[1]

If this is indeed what Pyrrho learned from the Gymnosophists, it fit well with ideas that were already flourishing in Athens, where skeptical teachers in the Academy that had been founded by Plato were advancing the very un-Platonic doctrine that no proposition can ever be known for certain. Anaxarchus, in fact, was one of those who accepted this view. Diogenes tells us that Anaxarchus "used to declare that he knew nothing, not even the fact that he knew nothing."[2] Later skeptics were to transform this into the doctrine that for every argument that can be given in favor of any assertion, an equally good argument can be given for its opposite. Therefore, they concluded, the wise man will suspend judgment about everything and believe nothing. Pyrrho was to become so closely identified with this view that it would be known to later generations simply as "Pyrrhonism."

Such a philosophy has its charms, but it also seems to have preposterous implications. Can it be taken seriously? Suppose you are standing in

the highway and there appears to be a truck coming in your direction. Your first impulse might be to run. But if Pyrrhonism is true, you can never have any better reason to believe there is a truck coming than to believe there is no truck coming. Moreover, you can have no good reason to believe it is better to go on living than to die. So why should you move? Why not just stand there and see what happens?

Surely, one might think, Pyrrho could not have meant *that*. That sounds like the sort of unfair parody that has always been used to discredit radical thinkers. But according to Diogenes, it is exactly what Pyrrho intended: "Pyrrho led a life consistent with his Skepticism, going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not, and generally, leaving nothing to the judgment of the senses. But he was kept out of harm's way by his friends who used to follow close after him."[3] One story is that Pyrrho came upon Anaxarchus stuck in a ditch. Unable to think of any good reason to rescue him, Pyrrho did not. Another passerby pulled the old man from the ditch and castigated Pyrrho for his heartlessness. The teacher, however, commended the student for having learned his lesson well.

Pyrrho's skepticism was epistemological; it was a view about the limits of what we can know. The primary recommendation of his philosophy, however, was ethical. The suspension of judgment about matters of truth and falsity, about good and evil, was said to lead to a state of tranquility that is the only secure path to happiness. Pyrrho seems to have been absolutely serious about this, no matter how much one might doubt that leaving old people in ditches and not avoiding carts and precipices lead to happiness.

We do not know whether these stories about Pyrrho's personal behavior are true. They are hard to believe, and in keeping with Pyrrho's own teaching, we might well be skeptical about them. Diogenes records that some ancient authorities also doubted them: "Aenesidemus says that it was only his philosophy that was based upon suspension of judgment, and that [Pyrrho] did not lack foresight in his everyday acts."[4] The truth probably lies somewhere between the two extremes. Pyrrho taught that one should always strive to maintain an attitude of indifference; it would be surprising, however, if anyone, Pyrrho included, could always succeed. "When a cur rushed at him and terrified him," says Diogenes, "he answered his critic that it was not easy to strip oneself of human weakness."[5] This story, more than the others, has the ring of truth.

It is clear, however, that Pyrrho took philosophy seriously in a way that it is not always taken seriously today. He did not believe that one's philosophical thinking should be insulated from one's everyday beliefs and

practice. For him, philosophical ideas were not merely notions to be entertained during a theoretical discussion and then forgotten. They were guides to life.

There is something undeniably attractive about this attitude. After all, if philosophy is not to be taken seriously, why bother with it? Pyrrho's seriousness becomes problematic only when it is combined with his skepticism. He thought that even the simplest beliefs of common sense will have to be revised if reasons are found for doubting them—and, he added, there frequently are good reasons to doubt what "common sense" decrees. He even went so far as to declare that there are good philosophical reasons for doubting the reality of space and time; so he concluded that we should not be so sure that we are here now, since "here" and "now" refer to space and time. This in turn meant that we should not act as though we know such things. Hence his reported indifference to carts, dogs, and precipices.

Pyrrho's assumption that what we think and what we do go hand in hand was shared by most thinkers throughout Western history. In the twentieth century, however, we have become accustomed to a different way of understanding philosophical ideas. Today, if a philosopher doubts the reality of space and time, or the legitimacy of our usual ways of talking about space and time, this is taken to be no reason at all for him or her not to apply for a sabbatical next year. Somewhere along the way, we learned to insulate our philosophical thinking from our first-order beliefs, and we even developed theories about the nature of our inquiry to justify this. When did this happen? Who invented insulation? Myles Burnyeat has written a splendid paper about this question in which he argues that Kant did it.[6] But that is not what I want to discuss here. Here I want to discuss insulation as a continuing practice in philosophical thinking about ethics.

Moorean Insulation

Skepticism about the reality of space and time has never attained the status of orthodoxy among philosophers, but it has been a perennial philosophic theme. Its last great advocates were the nineteenth-century idealists. Figures such as G. W. F. Hegel in Germany and F. H. Bradley in England rejected "common sense" about space and time no less emphatically than had Pyrrho. But common sense is not easily dismissed, and when G. E. Moore came to its defense at the beginning of the twentieth century, his arguments soon carried the day.

Moore's argument is familiar to all students of the history of philo-

sophical thought. Faced with skeptical doubts about the reality of time, Moore responded simply: today I had breakfast before I had lunch; therefore, time is real.[7] In its day, this was regarded as a powerful riposte. For a while, to deny common sense came to seem not merely wrong but disreputable. It became fashionable for philosophers to say that simple facts such as this one are far more certain than any convoluted arguments that might be marshaled against them. Today this is no longer so fashionable. Instead, it is commonly said that Moore was naïve to think that the skeptical arguments could be refuted so easily. The philosopher's claims about time, it is now said, are different from the sorts of claims that ordinary people make about breakfast coming before lunch. Therefore, nothing follows from the ordinary judgments about the philosophical issues.

Burnyeat comments that any philosopher who thinks he is not an insulator should consider his reaction to Moore. Moore was not an insulator, for he thought that philosophical claims do have straightforward implications for first-order judgments, and vice versa. Those who consider Moore's argument to be naïve apparently disagree. But Moore was an insulator of a more limited kind. Let me explain by making a distinction between doing philosophy *safely* and doing philosophy *with risk*.[8] Those who do philosophy safely proceed in such a way that their first-order beliefs are never called into doubt. They begin with the assumption that they know a great many (first-order) things to be true, and for them, philosophical thinking involves (only?) a search for principles and theories that would justify and explain what they already know. Those who do philosophy with risk, on the other hand, expose their first-order beliefs to the perils of thought. Everything is up for grabs. Any belief may have to be rejected if reasons are found against it; and one cannot say, in advance, what reasons might turn up for doubting what beliefs.

Those who do philosophy safely are insulators, but for them insulation works in only one direction. Their philosophical views will be tailored to accommodate their first-order beliefs, but the first-order beliefs are themselves held sacrosanct. They are not placed at risk. Moore was an insulator of this qualified sort. An ordinary belief might discredit a theory, but not the other way around. In his honor, if it is an honor, we might call this Moorean Insulation.

Moorean Insulation, when applied to the traditional issues of metaphysics—to questions about space and time, about physical objects, and so forth—is an appealing doctrine. It does seem right to say that we know breakfast comes before lunch; and it is tempting to conclude straightaway, as Moore did, that any philosophical doctrine that says otherwise must be false. But when we turn to moral philosophy, Moorean Insulation loses

much of its appeal, because moral "common sense" is less trustworthy. The moral beliefs that are common in our society, and that philosophers perforce share (or at least that they begin by sharing), may be in part the result of sensible thinking. But they may also be the products of historical and psychological processes that have involved superstition, selfishness, false religion, bad science, and bad metaphysics. Moorean Insulation would protect these beliefs from revision. It is, therefore, a profoundly conservative approach, bent on justifying whatever moral views we already happen to have.

Paradoxically, however, it is in moral philosophy that Moorean Insulation continues to be practiced. Metaphysicians, to whose subject it seems most agreeable, have largely rejected it. But in thinking about ethics, where it seems more dubious, it persists.

Moorean Insulation has been associated, throughout twentieth-century moral philosophy, with a certain style of argument—the familiar method of argument by counterexample. A thesis about morality will be advanced, together with arguments in its favor, and this will be met by the claim that the thesis cannot be true because it is contrary to a commonly held moral belief. Act-utilitarianism has been "refuted" a thousand times by this method. "Act-utilitarianism says that we should do whatever will produce the best results. But it might sometimes produce the best results to secure the judicial execution of an innocent person. This is never right. Therefore, act-utilitarianism must be rejected." In philosophical debate one still hears this sort of argument, although the examples given have changed over the years. More recently, examples involving what Bernard Williams calls "personal integrity" have been popular weapons against utilitarianism.[9] Now, however, many philosophers, including Williams, regard this style of reasoning as overly crude and recognize that it must at least be supplemented by a persuasive explanation of why it is always wrong to secure the judicial execution of the innocent, or why personal integrity is so important, or why whatever other example is being used has the significance it allegedly has. Happily, counterexamples alone are no longer considered so decisive as they once were.

Yet the eclipse of this style of argument has not meant the disappearance of Moorean Insulation. Moorean Insulation is also revealed by the extent to which, in constructing one's moral theory, one takes conformity to prereflective belief as a guiding consideration. One of the great virtues of John Rawls's work is that this methodological issue is out in the open.[10] Rawls explicitly endorses the idea of using one's moral intuitions as checkpoints for testing the acceptability of theory. Moral theory, he has said, is like linguistics. Just as a linguistic theory should reflect the com-

petent speaker's sense of grammaticalness, a moral theory should reflect the competent moral judge's sense of rightness. In some places, Rawls backs off from this strong statement and substitutes the idea that one's considered moral judgments should be brought into a "reflective equilibrium" with one's theoretical pronouncements. But the individual judgments still play an important regulative role, and the extent to which cherished moral beliefs are really placed at risk is left somewhat murky.

In Rawls's work this issue is out in the open; elsewhere, however, the issue may not be in the open, and Moorean Insulation may do its work unnoticed. One might, for example, reject utilitarianism and prefer a different sort of theory (one that emphasizes "the virtues," for example) because the latter sort of theory "does a better job of explaining" what is presumed to be our actual moral situation. The underlying conception of our actual moral situation may not be placed at risk. Instead, it may simply be presented in an attractive way that appeals to our prereflective sense of what moral life is like. Then the theorizing proceeds apace, and the developed theory is finally displayed as "explaining" why we should live in just the way we thought all along.

Or, to take a different sort of example, recently there has been a good bit of philosophical writing about the nature of personal relationships, taking it as a datum that we have special responsibilities and obligations to our parents, children, and friends. These are said to be responsibilities and obligations that we do not have to just everybody, but only to specific people in virtue of our specific type of relationship with them. A common move is to take this "fact" as a reason for rejecting any moral theory that seems to imply otherwise and to look instead for a theory that will give these relationships, and the responsibilities they involve, a central place. Frequently it is said that, even if we do not yet have such a theory, this is a necessary condition that any acceptable theory must meet.[11]

This is troubling, and not merely because it involves Moorean Insulation. Like everyone else, I have a deep feeling, which I can't shake, that my responsibilities to my own children are special. If I have to choose between feeding my own children and giving the food to starving orphans, I am going to feed my own. (More than that: faced with a choice between sending my own children to an expensive college and using the money to help feed starving orphans, I send my own to college.) It would be reassuring simply to assume that I am right to feel this way; and as a philosopher I could cast my vote in favor of a moral theory that makes my behavior come out right.

But there are disturbing arguments on the other side. After all, my children were merely lucky to have been born into a relatively affluent fami-

ly, while the orphans, who have the same needs and are equally deserving, were unlucky to have gotten stuck with their situation. Why should the just distribution of life's goods, right down to food itself, be determined in this way? Why should it be counted as a virtue for a moral theory to allow so much to depend on mere luck? But taking such an argument seriously means placing at risk the prereflective belief in the special importance of family relations. A Moorean Insulationist could, of course, take this argument seriously in a certain sense: it could be taken as something to be seriously refuted. But if one approaches the argument with anything like an open mind, allowing the possibility that there may be something to it, then the prereflective belief—even so fundamental a belief as the belief about the specialness of one's duties to one's own children—is suddenly in jeopardy.[12]

Can Moral Philosophy Be Subversive?

The alternative to Moorean Insulation is an approach that sees moral philosophy as a subversive activity that could, at least potentially, undermine even the most deep-seated assumptions of ordinary morality. The advantages of such an approach are evident. It makes no sense to conduct a search for the truth by assuming from the outset that we already know what the truth is. Moreover, only by rejecting insulation can we avoid incorporating into our theory the prejudices and other irrational elements that infect our prereflective judgments. However, matters are not so simple. Although it is appealing to say that we should abjure Moorean Insulation, getting rid of it may be hard to do.

One reason it might be hard to shake off Moorean Insulation is connected with the idea that in any inquiry we must have some starting point from which our reasoning proceeds. As Hume pointed out, every argument leads back to some first principle that is itself unjustified. If we ask for a justification of that principle, one can perhaps be given, but only by appealing to still another unjustified assumption. We can never justify all our assumptions, not even "in principle." This is a feature not merely of moral reasoning but of reasoning in general. In moral philosophy, though, it means that we must ultimately begin with some conception of what is morally important, which is itself taken for granted. A utilitarian might assume that what is important is maximizing welfare. Someone with a different cast of mind might make a different assumption. But no one can escape reliance on some starting point, which is insulated from challenge by its very place in the scheme of reasoning.

Thus it might seem that we have only two options: either we accept one or more moral principles (our "axioms") as self-evident and derive particular moral judgments from them; or we begin with the set of particular judgments that we find most plausible and work back to the general principles that explain and justify them. If these are our options, then the latter—which is nothing more than Moorean Insulation laid bare—might well be the more appealing.

But the first alternative has had its advocates. Peter Singer, among others, has argued in its favor. Speaking of those who, like Rawls, assume that our considered moral judgments are largely correct, he says:

> Why should we not rather make the opposite assumption, that all the particular moral judgments we intuitively make are likely to derive from discarded religious systems, from warped views of sex and bodily functions, or from customs necessary for the survival of the group in social and economic circumstances that now lie in the distant past? In which case, it would be best to forget all about our particular moral judgments, and start again from as near as we can get to self-evident moral axioms.[13]

This is about as radical a proposal as one could imagine. We are to start with self-evident axioms and then accept the particular judgments that follow from them, no matter how far from ordinary morality those judgments turn out to be. There are a number of fairly obvious objections that might be raised against this.

First, it is no obvious improvement to switch one's allegiance from self-evident judgments to self-evident axioms. Either way, our starting point is taken on faith. Furthermore, what is to prevent our choice of axioms from being influenced by the same irrational forces that warp our particular judgments?

Second, it may be observed that philosophers who have tried to do this have always failed. The utilitarians have come closest to succeeding. Taking the principle of utility as their self-evident starting point, utilitarians have been notably critical of ordinary morality. However, we might ask exactly what is supposed to be so self-evident about the principle of utility. The classic formulation of the principle—that we should act so as to maximize happiness and minimize suffering for all sentient beings—might fairly be described as self-evident. But it has never been self-evident that this is our *only* duty. Moreover, few utilitarians have stuck to the classic principle when confronted with objections. They have instead reformulated their principle in terms of such technical notions as "expected utility" or "overall preference satisfaction," and they have worried about whether it is average or total happiness that should be pursued.