

It is a common demand that we should be to
the point of moral philosophy is generative to the "the best
life for man" is a demand.

Should you give money to poor and rich? Should you stop
eating meat? Should you help the poor? Should you never
eat again? Should you give money to the poor? Should you tell poli-
ticians that they are wrong? Should you tell them that they are
right? Should you tell them that they are wrong? Should you
tell them that they are right? Should you tell them that they are
wrong? Should you tell them that they are right?

ALTRUISM OR DECENCY?

It was rush hour. Waves of people, most dressed in black,
moved across one another, toward or away from the metro
station. Some were transferring to connecting regional trains
or to those slated for longer routes. Others were coming in
from the cold outside, heading down long sets of stairs and
through cavernous halls toward the platforms. Those people
seemed to carry the chill in with them, their breath still
steaming as they entered the station. In many ways it was
like rush hour in any big city. But when a train arrived at the
platform where I was waiting, I noticed something different.

Crowded as the platform was, leaving little room to move,
none of the passengers boarded the train until everyone
who was exiting had gotten off. There was even a moment
of hesitation, a second's pause, before the first passengers
embarked. One person near the doors of the train craned
his head to look inside, checking to see whether anyone else
had yet to alight. Only then was there a general movement
to board.

The scene was something I gradually learned to expect in
Copenhagen. My experience growing up in New York City

was very different. There was impatience to get on the subway, an impatience that I shared. For some, more than a few, that impatience led to a sidelong movement, slicing through the exiting crowd and boarding the train while others were still trying to leave. The idea that there would be a moment's hesitation between the last person leaving and the first one entering was unthinkable. If someone did that we would all be wondering what was wrong with them. Perhaps they were tourists, or just clueless.

In Copenhagen it is not like this. People wait for one another, and not only at train stations. I have never seen someone push ahead of another in line or act impatiently at another's momentary faltering. There, the closest I have come to being berated is in the looks I received when stepping inadvertently into a bike lane. But after all, it can't be fun for a biker to swerve around someone who doesn't know that he is in the middle of traffic.

It's important not to romanticize this phenomenon, both because it isn't that romantic and because it would betray my point. In most respects, Copenhagen is like a lot of other big cities. People do not smile at strangers on the street. There is no sense of overt camaraderie on trains, buses, or elsewhere. While the word *tak*—thanks—is ubiquitous in its various forms for the smallest of favors, or even for expected service (Danes seem to seek out opportunities to thank others), the social feel of Copenhagen will be familiar to those who have wandered through other large urban areas. It is not that Copenhageners, or Danes in general, display a greater warmth toward others than one finds elsewhere. (In fact, I found more public warmth in Athens, and Greeks are not renowned for waiting patiently in lines.) Pather it is that they seem to recognize, or better to acknowledge, that those others are

there. Others, just like oneself, have schedules they're trying to meet, plans they're seeking to accomplish, projects that are carrying them forward. I too have a life I am trying to carry on, a life whose requirements have brought me here, to this metro platform, at this moment. But so do these people leaving the train. And that is a fact I should take into account or, even better, inculcate as a natural part of my own behavior.¹ This acknowledgment is the basis—the moral core—of what I am going to call *decency*.

This is a book about that decency. It is not a book about being an exemplary moral person, what is sometimes called an altruist. Nor is it a book about how to fulfill our basic moral requirements, the least we might owe to one another. Much of contemporary discussion of morality seems concerned with such issues, in ways I will canvass in a moment. My concern is different. Simply put, most of us want to be better than moral mediocrities and yet don't see ourselves as altruists; how then might we think about living morally? How might we frame our approach to morality? I use the word *decency* to capture one way to do so. Decency, as I articulate it, is not concerned with traditional concepts in moral philosophy such as duty, right, utility, intent, obligation, or the Good. Or, more precisely, it cuts across all these concepts. I am not interested here in questions of what the ultimate good is or how to conceive our duties or whether we are obliged to craft the best moral character we can manage. Philosophers far more capable than I am have debated these questions across the centuries. My interest is more pedestrian. Most of us are incapable of living lives that are beacons of moral light. Yet most of us also desire to be morally decent people, and we have some more or less inchoate sense of how that might go. Is there some way to frame moral decency that

would enlighten us as to what we are up to in some of our better moments, a frame that at the same time might act as a reflective standard for maintaining or even multiplying those moments? Such is the project of this book.

PHILOSOPHY REFLECTS ON MORALITY

Before I unfold my own view, let's pause to consider the current state of philosophical reflection on morality. Even those who are not vocationally immersed in such reflection—which is almost everyone—will likely have at least a breezy familiarity with the moral concepts that characterize current moral debates. For instance, questions of whether the ends justify the means or the importance of intending to do the right thing are familiar to all of us. Philosophical reflection approaches such questions in a more formal way, with different language, but the roots of that reflection can always be traced back to perennial human concerns.

We might divide philosophical moral positions into three types: consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics.² If we investigate these positions, we will see that they do not give us the guidance we need if what we're after is not altruism but simple moral decency. The first position conveniently announces in its name where it thinks the proper moral stakes lie: in the consequences. This is the position that the ends in fact do justify the means. Of course, not all ends justify any means—which is what some people often mistake for the definition of consequentialism. Rather, it is the view that we ought to act in a way that promotes the most good (however "good" is defined) at the lowest moral cost. If this sounds like an economic version of morality, it should. Consequentialists would like to incorporate all the (alleged) precision of economics into moral decision-making. Plus, they believe that

ultimately results are what matter. To put it another way, the moral bottom line for consequentialists lies in contributing to making the world a better place.

Consider this example. You want to break up with your boyfriend. You care for him, but you know that this is not going to work out in the long run. He's a really nice guy, and attractive, but in the end just a bit too boring. Or he holds political or religious views that get on your nerves. Or he allows his mother to intrude on your relationship in ways that you just cannot abide. But here's the problem. He's really into you, and you know that breaking up with him will make him suffer. Moreover, in breaking up it will be *you* who makes him suffer. You will be responsible. You would really rather that things end differently. Maybe you could make yourself unpleasant around him so he would break up with you instead. Or perhaps there is somebody you could introduce him to that would capture his fancy. Or, as a last resort, maybe time will take care of it without your having to do anything.

In the end, though, you know that relying on any of these alternatives is not likely to work out and that the longer you allow this relationship to drag on, the worse it will be in the long run for both of you. Better to break up now, cause the suffering he will inevitably endure, and then allow him as well as you to move on. The result—less suffering overall—justifies the means—suffering in the short term.

This is an easy case. There are much more difficult ones that we all could think of, such as whether to agree with a friend about an important, but false, belief they have if you fear it will cause them her pain to learn the truth or, on a larger scale, whether to place some civilians at greater risk during war time to save a larger number of civilians. However, although the calculations may become complex, the

approach does not differ. Consequentialist moral assessment focuses on the most good that can be achieved at the least cost. The point of morality for consequentialists is to improve the world's conditions, and such calculation determines the best way to do it.

I should note in passing that consequentialism—like other moral approaches—does have some odd, well, consequences. In fact, all moral theories have their quirks. If some moral view came along that didn't, it would probably knock all the other competing theories out of contention. One of the quirks of consequentialism is that it allows for what is sometimes called moral luck. I can do the right thing through sheerest contingency, perhaps even when I'm trying to do the wrong thing. Suppose, for instance, that I offer to teach someone in my office the new computer program that has just been installed. In fact, I have no intention of teaching it to him, but instead plan to keep putting off the teaching so that my colleague will fall behind and get a worse evaluation than I will. However, my supervisor overhears my offer and then realizes that she should set up a training session for the new program for everyone. My action, although aimed toward a bad consequence, has actually had a good one. And so, by the lights of consequentialist theory, it is a good act.

Deontological theory, which focuses on people's intentions or actions rather than consequences, would instead consider such underhanded behavior morally bad. For the deontologist, the means rather than the end is the morally salient characteristic of an action. What makes an act right or wrong is the intention behind it or the way it came about. To see this, we can look at the view of the classic deontologist, Immanuel Kant. For Kant, an act is the right one only if it conforms to what he calls the "categorical imperative." The im-

perative has several formulations, but the most often invoked one is "Act only on that maxim through which at the same time you can will that it should become a universal law."³

What does this mean? We can understand it more clearly if we look back at our two examples. Should you break up with your boyfriend, whom you do not love? In this case Kant would offer the same answer as the consequentialist—you should—but for a very different reason. It's not that it would cause more suffering to delay the breakup, but rather in delaying it you are acting dishonestly with him. And you cannot will dishonesty to a universal law, at least not without contradicting yourself.⁴ Think of it this way. If everyone were dishonest, then no one would trust anyone else. And if no one trusted anyone else, dishonesty would lose its point. Dishonesty works only against a background of trust. If you don't trust me I can't mislead you with my dishonesty. So if everyone were dishonest—that is, if dishonesty were a universal law—then dishonesty would lose its very point. So, Kant says, you cannot rationally will dishonesty to be a universal law. And if you can't do that, it is morally forbidden to act dishonestly.⁵

Deontology, in contrast to consequentialism, is not concerned with the results of the way one acts but rather with the intentions or means that animate it. This would lead Kant to the opposite assessment of my misleading my colleague about teaching him the computer program. Yes, Kant would argue, the act inadvertently had good consequences, but the intention behind the act—once again, dishonesty—could not consistently be willed as a universal law. Therefore the act was morally wrong.

Kant's view, like consequentialism, has its quirks. Consider this one. When I started going bald, I found it disturbing.

(Eventually I began to shave my head in a sort of “You can’t fire me because I quit” response.) My wife was merciful enough to deny the obvious. No, she assured me, it didn’t seem to her that I was losing my hair. I knew what was happening, since there are mirrors in my house. But she was letting me down easy, and in doing that by lying was violating Kant’s categorical imperative. In other words, she was acting immorally.

There are more serious quirks as well. A classic case in the philosophical literature is this one. You’ve made an appointment to meet a student, promising them you will be in your office at a certain time to discuss their grade on a recent paper. On the way there you see somebody get hit by a car. They’re lying in the street and you can aid them, but it will make you miss your meeting. If you follow Kant’s moral view, you must meet the student instead of helping the victim of the accident, since you cannot will breaking a promise to be a universal law.

The quirks I have cited for both consequentialism and deontology are not meant to be decisive refutations of their views. There are reams written about how to deal with these quirks, or whether—as in the case of moral luck—they are a problem at all. Rather, my point here is to note that there is not a straightforward path from these views in their simple form to moral practice, a point that will have bearing for us in a bit. So it should be no surprise that the third leading theory, virtue ethics, has its own complications.

Originally drawn from the ancient philosopher Aristotle, virtue ethics has been enjoying a renaissance in philosophy over the past thirty years or so. What distinguishes virtue ethics from consequentialism and deontology is its shift of moral concern from focusing on acts to focusing on the moral status of oneself. We might say that if the key question

for consequentialism and deontology is “How should I act?” then the key question for virtue ethics is “How should I live?”⁶

Aristotle argues that the good life is one of *eudaemonia*, often translated as “happiness” but perhaps better rendered as “flourishing.” What is this good life of *eudaemonia*? For Aristotle, “the human good proves to be activity of the soul in accord with virtue.” To live well is to cultivate and express different virtues, such as bravery, temperance, wisdom, and generosity. Famously, these are means between extremes. For instance, bravery is a mean between rashness and cowardice. This does not imply that it is somehow halfway between the two. Rather, it is properly situated between them in a way that the virtuous person will understand. Moreover, Aristotle thinks that virtues are complementary to one another. Cultivating each of them will help us to cultivate the others; there is no conflict among them.

As is often noted, the assumption that virtues will not conflict is a shaky one. Bravery, for instance, does not necessarily help us become more temperate. In fact, there could be tensions between the two, as when performing a brave act requires me to lay aside my temperance and focus on the dangers I’m confronting. But even if we abandon this assumption, we should still ask how much guidance a theory like this can give us in our moral lives. Yes, we might become better people through being more temperate or wise or generous, but how do we do that and where in our lives are we supposed to display this or that virtue? There seems to be some distance between the virtues that Aristotle recommends to us and the answer to the question of how one should live.

This is not to say that the distance cannot be bridged. But even if it can, it leaves a deeper question, one that is characteristic of all three moral approaches. Aristotelean virtue ethics offers an account of how we should live. Consequentialism

and deontology offer us views of how we should act. Each of these views is an account of what a proper moral existence would consist in. Each tells us what we should do or how we should live. We might ask which of these views is more nearly right. Philosophers do that all the time. My concern here is different. No matter which view we pick, we will find it difficult to live up to its requirements. Very difficult. In dictating the proper moral form of our existence, all these theories ask more than most of us are capable of. This is not hard to see.

To be a consequentialist, for instance, is to be concerned always with the best consequences of one's actions. That involves a lot of sacrifice. Am I really to count my own interests, as well as those people I care about, as having no more of a grip on me than the interests of others? Am I to be expected always to abandon my commitments to those I love or to those projects I'm committed to when it would do more good to do so? That is certainly asking a lot of me.⁹

But it seems to be no less demanding than holding the categorical imperative to be the only source of my moral existence. Perhaps I shouldn't help a friend of mine cheat on his exams or claim more hours at work than he has actually put in, but must I really keep a promise to go to the movies with my brother when, on the way to the theater, I get a call from an acquaintance in deep distress who just needs someone to talk to? Or can I never act in a way that benefits me at the expense of another? Am I to treat everyone around me with the same moral solicitude that I treat my friends?

Or in virtue ethics does the cultivation of virtues have no letup? Does it allow for no moral holidays? Aristotle himself recognized the difficulty of living the good life, even though he thought it was the *telos*—the goal—of being human. It requires rigorous training in an environment conducive to

developing the habits each of the virtues requires. It also requires friends, adequate material resources, and a physical appearance that is at least not ugly. Moreover, he seems to doubt that most of us will get there. While not impossible, it seems that the good life, the life of *eudaimonia*, is difficult to attain and often difficult to maintain over the course of a lifetime.

From the perspective of all these theories, the moral life is a difficult one. It requires a great deal of sacrifice and focus, often turning us away from our most important commitments and toward ways of living that, while admirable, are onerous or even impossible for many of us to achieve.

DOES TRADITIONAL MORAL PHILOSOPHY ASK TOO MUCH?

Are the moral burdens these views place upon us unnecessary or unfair? Maybe instead we should just live different lives from the ones most of us inhabit now. Does the difficulty of embracing one or another of these moral theories tell against them? Perhaps the problem lies not in the theories. Perhaps it lies in us, in our own unwillingness to commit ourselves to better lives. Perhaps, rather than rejecting the prescriptions of these moral theories as beyond our capacities, we should learn to develop those capacities to meet the challenges the theories present to us. If morality indeed does ennoble us, our proper task might well be to make ourselves more noble than we currently strive to be.

One of the most famous of contemporary moral philosophers, Peter Singer, has offered an argument for an extreme form of altruism that still has a grip on many people today. In his seminal article, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," he provides us with an indelible image: "If I am walking by a

shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean I will get my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.”

We can all agree that I should pull the child out of the pond. It would be irresponsible of me not to. I am deeply obliged to save the child. It is not an act of charity on my part but rather a moral duty. But what is the relevant difference, Singer asks, between the effort required to save this child and the effort required to save a starving child somewhere else on the planet by writing a check to an organization that delivers food to starving children? He argues that simple physical distance can't make the former an obligation and the latter a matter of voluntary charity. Why should geographical proximity be relevant? What moral bearing could it possibly have? I am just as obliged, he argues, to write the check as to wade into the pond. In fact, I might be *more* obliged to the starving child. It costs me less effort to write a check than it does to clean off muddy clothes. If we count the difficulty of the effort to help someone as morally relevant (so, for example, I might not be required to save the drowning child at the risk of my own life), then I should write the check even before I consider wading into the pond.

So far, so good. What Singer seems to have shown us is that we have more moral obligations than we thought we did. But he goes further. After all, there are a lot of starving children I can save by writing checks, and a lot of other children whose suffering I can relieve in many other ways. If it costs me little effort in each case to do so, then why would I be less obliged to each of these children than to the first one? Consider this admittedly strange example. Suppose I get muddy my clothes and save the drowning child. Then I continue on my

way. But a few minutes later I see another drowning child in another shallow pond. Am I less obliged to save this child than the first one? Is this next child's life worth less, or will my effort to save them be decidedly more? My clothes are already muddy, so in that sense it would be less effort to save this next child. And what of the child after that? (Perhaps it has been extremely rainy recently.) And the following one? And further, what is the difference between each of these drowning children and all the starving children that I can save through writing checks?

You can see where this leads. It is not that there is no end to my obligations. But they don't end very soon. Singer argues, “If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable importance, we ought, morally, to do it.”¹⁰ This principle tells me where my obligations end: when fulfilling the obligation would require me to sacrifice something “of comparable importance,” in this case my life. That's a pretty strict moral principle. Singer thinks it is the right one. But he does concede that a weaker principle might also be applied, that we be willing to sacrifice something up to the point where what we would be sacrificing is “morally significant.”¹¹ The difference here is that on the stronger principle I would be obliged to reduce my level of well-being to something near that of a starving child before my obligation to save starving children would end. Since my life is worth no more than any of theirs, why should my well-being matter more?

However, even if we take the weaker principle, we would still have to sacrifice a good bit. Most of us don't consider eating at restaurants, or buying the occasional nice outfit, or attending sports events, or traveling on vacation, or enjoying an evening drink, or taking our children to a play to be

subject to moral criticism. But in Singer's view they are. We can get by well enough without doing any of these things. Even on the weaker principle, then, we would still be required to forgo a good bit. And think of this: in each case we have a particular enjoyment on one side of the scale and the life of a starving child on the other. How morally significant would any of these activities really seem to be then?

If Singer is right, we are obliged to act according to a very strict morality. This obligation is different from the one we saw in Aristotle and Kant. For them, the reason for rigor lay in our essence as human beings. We are essentially rational creatures and so to act on something less than our rationality is a betrayal of our human character. Peter Singer doesn't care about our human essence. What matters to him is simply the fact that each of us is only one among many whose interests have equal moral worth. Therefore we have no moral justification in treating our interests better (or, on the weaker principle, much better) than anyone else's.¹²

But is he right? Are we really obliged to act in accordance with a morality that would ask of us to sacrifice our deepest personal commitments and projects if these conflict with moral requirements, be they consequentialist, deontological, or virtue ethical?