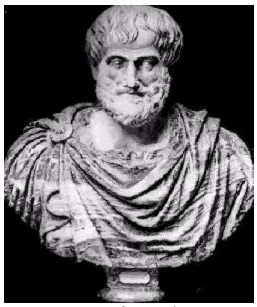
ARISTOTLE

(*Before reading the following lecture, you should find and watch the RealPlayer presentation in Module Two entitled "Ethics and Human Nature"*)

Where does Morality Come From?

In the RealPlayer presentation for this module, we emphasized the significance of the appeals to "nature" and to "human nature" that links many early works in ethics. As we go through the background and arguments for the readings in our textbook for this module, keep those insights in mind. This module gives us more insight into several of the "Big Questions" for the course, including: "What is ethics?", and "What are the roles of (a) reason, (b) desire, and (c) the emotions in ethics?" Of particular interest are these readings as exercises in "meta-ethics" (Another Big Question is, "What is 'meta-ethics'?"), or the study of what makes ethics possible. By asking where ethics comes from and what its nature is, we may come to a better understanding of what constitutes good thinking in ethics in general. Another important Big Question that these authors address is, "Are ethics objective or 'merely' subjective?" This question gets to the heart of the ages-old problem of whether our moral behavior has some basis in the facts of *what kind of creatures we are*, or whether morality is simply an imposition on us by societies, traditions, or powerful leaders.

Note that I occasionally ask rhetorical questions and ask about what you think about certain ideas. ***These are not questions you need to answer in writing,*** *but do think about them.*

As with the Plato reading in the last module, you are best served in these lectures by reading the "Background" section first. You can get a recap of the main points in "The Argument," but this is no substitute for reading the primary source itself in the Singer text. As you get further into the "Argument" sections in this and other modules, I leave more interpretation up to you, posing guiding questions to help you get to the truth.

I. Aristotle: virtues, habits, nature
A. BACKGROUND

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) is one of the wisest of the philosophers a figure whose ideas show up again and again in ethics; we'll meet him several times in this course, so I present the most complete background for his writings here. Like Plato, Aristotle helped set the tone for the future of philosophy.

Aristotle had interests that ranged all over; he did research, taught, and wrote on subjects such as meteorology, astronomy, animal anatomy, biology, comedy and drama, poetry, and many other subjects, including, of course, philosophy. Although we have access to a large number of his texts today, scholars suspect that many were lost in the destruction of

the great library at Alexandria and the tumult during the collapse of the Roman Empire. Today, we mainly owe medieval Arab scholars for what we have of his work.

Aristotle's broad interests are in the consistency and coherency of human knowledge. Although not all his philosophy can be linked together into one great system, he was concerned to shape different kinds of knowledge into "sciences," but sometimes these sciences had different rules. Aristotle said that different rules applied, for example, in the study of the unchanging "heavenly sphere" than in the studies of humankind, including political science, law and ethics.

We have two main texts for Aristotle's virtue-based ethics: the *Eudemian Ethics* and the far more famous *Nicomachean Ethics*, from which all the selections in Singer are taken. In this work, Aristotle has four main goals:

1. To show that ethics has a foundation in human nature.
2. To show that to be ethical, we must be virtuous, and that to be virtuous, we must (a) be trained in moral education and (b) use our reason.
3. To demonstrate that the use of reason in acting and feeling virtuously depends on our recognizing the need for moderation in all things, and
4. To show that, of all the kinds of relationships in the world, friendship is the best.

Let's see how our first short passage from Aristotle fits into this project.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. Unless you're a student of Greek, the two words in parenthesis in the first paragraph probably were lost on you—but note, they are (in order) ἐΤΗΙΚΕ and ἔΤΗΟΣ. Aristotle's goal here is to make a point about the role of habit in making us ethical. What do you think that point is? Aristotle says, near the end of this paragraph, "Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us…." He apparently thinks that we aren't virtuous by nature, but equally we aren't made incapable of learning to be moral by nature, either. Rather, we are "adapted by nature to receive" the virtues.

2. In the second and third paragraphs, Aristotle says he believes that we learn to be virtuous by *doing*, not by learning a set of rules or principles. In part, this means we need to, as he says, "become just by doing just acts." But this also has implications for a view of human reason. In ethics, Aristotle's ideas have lead to the belief that when we use our reason to become more ethical, this is an exercise of *practical* reason, which is different from the *theoretical* reason we use when we try to solve a problem or construct an explanation.

3. In the third paragraph, we learn two important things: (a) being virtuous is a "state of character," or a way of *being*, not merely about how we *act* or what we *believe* (this idea is an important staple of all virtue theories of ethics, but also part of contemporary controversies about whether we can "make people good" or

not through education, rehabilitation, etc.). We also find out that (b) "by the same means…every virtue is both produced and destroyed." What does this mean? Aristotle goes on to say in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that training a virtuous person is like training a weightlifter by having them avoid lifting too many weights that are too heavy or weights that are too light to work the muscles. The moral education of a virtuous person must expose them to situations in which they can react in an ethical way, but must maintain the same standards of moderation. One of my favorite examples that illustrates training for Aristotle's virtue of temperance in eating and drinking is the "sociable eater," who integrates well into a party by eating *some* of the treats and canapés that the host provides (it wouldn't be polite—and therefore not virtuous—to simply turn your nose up at the food!) but doesn't spend their whole time at the buffet gorging. Can you think of another example of virtuous behavior that requires moderation?

II: Mencius: nourishing the good soul
A. BACKGROUND

"**Mencius** (4th century B.C.E) was a defender of the philosophy of Confucius. The *Book of Mencius*, one of the classics of Chinese philosophy, is a book of his teachings and conversations, probably compiled by his pupils after his death" (from Singer, p. 403).

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. The reading starts off as a kind of dialogue between two sages, Kao Tzu (later supported by Kung-tu Tzu) and Mencius. Kao Tzu seems to offer three different views of morality and human nature on pp. 27-28:
   - Kao Tzu's theory #1: human nature is "violated" by making it righteous, much like making a willow tree into a cup or bowl effectively destroys the original willow tree (*as* a willow, mind you). This would seem to imply that humans are unrighteous (the opposite of righteous) or non-righteous (neither righteous nor unrighteous) by nature.
   - Kao Tzu's theory #2: human nature is "like whirling water, indifferent to east or west." This view is a true **relativism** about human nature, saying that we are neither good nor bad naturally, but implies we become good or bad because of training or other social influences.
   - Kung-tu Tzu's theory #3: seizing on Mencius's statement that "man can be made to do evil," this follower of Kao Tzu says that if we are good by nature, how can we be made the opposite by training? This view could support either of Kao Tzu's theories above.

2. Mencius offers a view contrary to those in (1) above, namely that we are good and righteous by nature (contrast this with Aristotle's view in I. above and Hobbes's view in II. Below). On p. 28, Mencius supports his view with a list of universal

traits common to all human beings; see if you can find them. Yet Mencius also responds to the ideas of Kao Tzu and Kung-tu Tzu by saying that "with proper nourishment and care, everything grows, whereas without proper nourishment and care, everything decays." It is possible to lose one's goodness, he says, without some "care of the soul."

3. Both Aristotle and Mencius use **analogies** to talk about human nature. Aristotle favors analogies that support his idea that virtue is only supported by good habits, while Mencius utilizes analogies from nature, like the willow tree and the whirling water. Since I will ask you to reflect upon the ideas of nature and human nature in the "Ponder This" question below, now is a good time to raise the issue initially: can we learn anything about ourselves by comparing ourselves to other things in nature, like animals (who act, for the most part, habitually or instinctually) or rocks and trees (which are neither good nor bad, but made so by being turned into medicine or weapons)? What do you think?

III. Hobbes: the war of all against all
A. BACKGROUND

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is one of the most significant ethical and political thinkers of the early modern period, and continues to be debated and discussed today in contexts of contract-based ethics and philosophical psychology. He was interested in applying his version of the ancient doctrine of **materialism** to all areas of human life, so his views of language, mind, morality and politics reflected his basic idea that everything in the world could be understood in terms of matter in motion.

Hobbes was a well-read debater with a sharp tongue, and is read not only for his materialism and political thinking in his famous book *Leviathan* but also for his often brilliant correspondence with many of the famous figures of his era, including John Locke and Rene Descartes. In this selection, we get the background for Hobbes's own moral view, often called "enlightened **egoism**." In brief, this theory is that human beings always act in what they see as their own self-interest, but sometimes this has the effect of shooting ourselves in the foot because we actually do things that make it harder to achieve our interests. Because we are rational, Hobbes says, we can put short-term self-interests aside in favor of long-term goals such as security and cooperation. Hobbes's views are strongly influenced by his experiences of the English Civil War, a period he viewed as hateful anarchy.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. In the beginning of this passage, Hobbes offers his view of human nature by describing what he calls the "state of nature"—the period of human existence before the rise of civilization. Hobbes does this to separate out what he sees as the ordering and controlling influences of civilized society from our natural abilities and impulses. Two things are primary in the state of nature—our basic

equality with each other, and the fact of scarce resources. We all need and want the same things, and because we are all more or less equally suited to secure those things, we come into competition with each other. Conflict is, for Hobbes, the basic condition of the state of nature, because we are all egoists—that is, interested in fostering our own self-interest. "Hereby it is manifest," he writes, "that during the time men live with a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man." There is no civilization in the state of nature, Hobbes says at the bottom of p. 31, and in a famous quote, he claims that "the life of man [in the state of nature is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

2. Surely given such a state, humans must be bad by nature, since we would do such horrible things to each other just to get a coconut or a cave-bear skin from each other! No, for Hobbes there is no morality, no good nor bad, no justice nor injustice in the state of nature. There is only narrow, short term self-interest, which all of us share. Your good is my evil, my evil your good. The advantage of being licensed to steal coconuts or cave-bear pelts is that no one can lock you up for your actions; the disadvantage is that *I* can steal your coconuts and cave-bear pelts, too! Hobbes' evidence for all this is on p. 32.

3. Where does morality come from, then? From what Hobbes calls the "right of Nature" (p. 33), which is our right of self-preservation. Everyone starts off being equal in defending his right to life, Hobbes says. From this right, Hobbes infers three "laws of Nature" (pp. 33-34):

   - First, we can defend ourselves by any means necessary, but we should, when we can, seek peace. How can we achieve a long-lasting peace…?
   - Well, second, we can agree with others in our community to mutual limitations on our freedom. Basically, I make a contract with you not to steal your coconuts and cave-bear pelts, and you do the same with me.
   - Third, we all have to own up to the responsibility to keep to our contracts, or else, as Yogi Berra once said, "A verbal agreement isn't worth the paper it's written on." This "origin of justice" in making and keeping contracts leads to Hobbes's last point…

   Now think about this for a moment. We dragged ourselves out of the state of nature by trading greater security and cooperation for our basically absolute freedom to steal each other's coconuts and cave-bear pelts (and murder each other, etc.!). We're still egoists, but now we're *enlightened* egoists—you're scratching my back and I'm scratching yours. But what if I decide it's in my self-interest to *cheat*? Hobbes replies, "…before the names of just and unjust can have place, there must be some coercive power, to compel men equally to the performance of their covenants, by the terror of some punishment, greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their covenant…" (p. 34). Hobbes called this "coercive power" the *Leviathan* and in his time, it was a King

or Queen, a person who enforces the law on all, but who was above the law himself or herself because of their God-given right to rule.

4. The need for a coercive power continues, Hobbes would say. Without laws and social order, we regress to a state of anarchy (you guessed it, the state of nature again!) that no one wants. The basis for good and evil is that we keep the agreements with others we make (most importantly the basic, hypothetical agreement he calls the "social contract" that protects life, liberty and property) and that we "face the music" when we fail to keep our covenants. Most people find Hobbes view either realistic or pessimistic. How *you* think about it may say a lot about your own view of human nature.

IV. Rousseau: a kinder, gentler state of nature
A. BACKGROUND

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was born in Geneva and lived and worked in France, Switzerland, and Italy. On a short but memorable trip to the British Isles, he briefly encountered David Hume (see V. below). Rousseau is a transitional figure in the history of philosophy. While he produced famous works such as *The Social Contract* and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in the period known as the "Enlightenment," which stressed the power of reason to liberate individuals and society from superstition and dogma, he provided inspiration to later figures in the Romantic movement, including Goethe, Schelling, Keats, Coleridge and Shelley. His vision of the "noble savage" has had an influence on all subsequent thinking about human nature and was challenged only by early twentieth-century anthropological field studies.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. In his writings, Jean-Jacques Rousseau also talks about a "state of nature" and a "social contract." Obviously, he isn't using these terms in exactly the same way as Hobbes or this reading would be redundant. Rousseau is an example of philosophical subtlety—he doesn't entirely reject Hobbes's views, but he doesn't accept them whole cloth, either. And in his emphasis on the value of human pity, he foreshadows one of the most important aspects of Hume's thinking (see V. below).

2. Rousseau begins with a fairly idyllic view of the state of nature, de-emphasizing the role of conflict and instead contrasting humans with animals in our abilities to appropriate natural resources for our needs. When he turns to the question of whether we have moral relationships or duties in nature, he doesn't simply echo Hobbes's negative response. His rejection of Hobbes's idea that we are "naturally wicked" (p. 36) may be a misreading of his fellow philosopher, since as we saw, Hobbes doesn't think there is any such thing as wickedness or goodness in the state of nature, merely self-interested competition. Maybe Rousseau treats

Hobbes's overemphasis on self-interest as "wickedness" itself. What do you think? What does Rousseau say about *pity*, the human trait that "takes the place of laws, moral habits, and virtues" in the state of nature?

3. Note at the top of p. 36, there is a complicated passage in which Rousseau is considering the question of whether we are good or bad in the state of nature. What is going on here? We should suspend judgment and guard against our own biases, Rousseau says, "until we have observed, with the scales of impartiality in our hands, [whether there are] more virtues than vices among civilized men, whether those men's virtues are more beneficial than their vices are pernicious; or whether the advancement of their knowledge adequately compensates for the harm they do each other…." Rousseau seems to be saying that we need to weigh the relative virtues and vices of humans in the state of nature with the virtues and vices of today's "civilized humans." How do you think Rousseau would judge us in this assessment? How would you?

V. Hume: sympathy and the conflict inside all of us
A. BACKGROUND

A central figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, **David Hume** (1711-1776) was a kind of "Renaissance man," publishing works on literature and **aesthetics**, economics, culture and history (he was the author of a definitive five-volume *History of Great Britain*) and, of course, philosophy. His major work, the *Treatise of Human Nature*, was brilliant and radical and was published when he was about 25 years old, but was neglected by fellow philosophers and critics: "My work has fallen still-born from the press," Hume famously complained.

Hume's philosophical work centers on the exploration of three main themes:

1. Philosophy should be understood as a "science of human nature," since it is only through our capacities as human (senses, imagination, reason) that we understand the world and act within it.
2. We should not give too much credit to the power of reason, since reason puts a demand for consistency and coherency on our thinking that often causes us to offer unjustified explanations for things that puzzle us. Hume's famous example of this was cause and effect: we cannot help but organize the world in terms of this basic category of thinking, but we cannot *prove* that causes will always produce certain effects. We *need* to think in this way, but we may not be able to show that our thinking mirrors the real world.
3. In ethics, Hume says, we can rely on our natural *sympathy* with other human beings to help us ascertain what is right. We cannot rely on reason to tell us what to do, however, since "reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions."

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. Reading over the entire piece reveals to us that Hume thinks we are both self-interested (like Hobbes) and concerned for others (like Rousseau). According to Hume at the beginning of this excerpt from *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, what two "languages" do we speak that correspond to these "affections" of the human spirit? Another way of putting this: what is the difference in meaning when we call someone *our rival*, versus calling them *evil*?

2. Now let's ask: why is our concern for the common good properly *moral* according to Hume, while our "self-love" is *not*? What can you glean from this passage: "Whatever conduct gains my approbation [approval] by touching my humanity, procures also the applause of all mankind, by affecting the same principle in them; but what serves my avarice or ambition pleases these passions in me alone, and affects not the avarice and ambition of the rest of mankind" (p. 38)? Is it fair to say that, for Hume, we act morally when our sympathy for others and the public good tempers our ambition to do what is best for ourselves?

C. Module 2 Writing Assignment (10 points)

1. Of the philosophers we looked at in this Module, which one has a theory closest to your own view of human nature? Explain their view by using what you think is an instructive quote from the Singer textbook and then discuss what you might disagree with them on.

2. Why do you think that philosophers are fascinated with the question of what human nature is? What other questions in ethics does the answer to this question depend on?