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Chapter 1: Ethics, Truth and Reason

The Problem of Subjectivism: It is often believed that, unlike other branches of knowledge, such as science, morality is subjective, “we can only have personal opinions about values.”

- E.g. the Sophists divided reality in physis or the ‘world of facts’ and nomos or values. They believed there is no such thing as truth or falsity in the latter; we can only use rhetoric to persuade others to accept our values, we cannot use reasoning to discover the truth about them.¹

Plato argued against subjectivism: he believed reason would tell us truths regarding matters of morality, which, like other facts, have objective reality.

Relativism and Subjectivism:

Arguments for Subjectivism (and Relativism):

1. The existence of conflicting opinions about morality
2. The impossibility of proving which of these opinions is superior…
3. … because there are no observable moral facts.

Let’s look at these in more detail:

The Subjectivist’s (and Relativist’s) First Argument:
Disagreement about morality and values occurs in two ways:

- There is disagreement between cultures about what is acceptable and what is not, e.g. arranged marriages, which are right in certain societies, and wrong in others. The view of ethical relativism emphasizes these differences, arguing that there is nothing which is right or wrong ‘per se’ (in itself) or ‘universally.’ Whether something is considered morally acceptable or otherwise is relative to a society, (i.e. a system of beliefs found in a particular place) and to a historical setting (i.e. a period of time).

- There is disagreement between individuals too, and this forms the basis for ethical subjectivism, the idea that morality (like aesthetic taste?) is a matter of individual preference. E.g. abortion is one issue over which individuals (in the same society) often disagree. Whether something is right or wrong according to this view, is not an objective fact, (which everybody must agree with), but is subjective, depending on one’s personal tastes, values, feelings, etc.

Graham’s Counter-arguments to the first argument:
- There is actually a lot of agreement between cultures regarding morality. Certain acts are widely held to be wrong, e.g. slavery, child abuse, rape, murder…whereas other qualities are approved, e.g. honesty, loyalty, generosity

[C.S.² Think about this… was slavery always believed to be wrong? Is loyalty always an admirable quality?]

¹ Strictly speaking, Sophists are relativists not subjectivists (see below)
² Comments in italics preceded by the initials C.S. are my own thoughts on Graham’s ideas.
• When individuals disagree, e.g. when someone is not ashamed of being a rapist, this is usually a sign of mental illness

• Disagreement does not necessarily imply subjectivism or relativism; in science too, there is lots of disagreement (between individual scientists and across time), and yet, we do accept that science can and does uncover objective truths. Even though scientists often disagree strongly with each other, without a belief in objective truth, the whole pursuit of scientific knowledge would not make sense and there would be no point in even having discussions about science.

The Subjectivist’s (and Relativist’s) Second Argument:
The impossibility of proving moral theories:

• The difference between science and morality is that even though there is disagreement in science, there is always the possibility of eventually discovering the truth. There is the possibility of progress in science, in the sense that, as theories replace each other, we believe that we are getting nearer to the truth. With morality, although views change, we have no way of knowing if (and no reason to think that) we are any closer to the truth.

• Every attempt to reach proof in moral philosophy has failed.

Graham’s Counter-arguments to the second argument:

• Most branches of knowledge are lacking in proof, not just ethics. E.g. what passes for ‘proof’ in the law courts is not absolute or conclusive evidence, but merely “establishing a case beyond doubt.”

Graham’s Hypothesis (1): Could there be moral proofs in this sense? Could ethics reach conclusions which, although not established absolutely, are strong enough that we have no doubt left?

The Subjectivist’s (and Relativist’s) Third Argument:
There is no objective “fact of the matter” regarding morality - in other words, in science, when there is disagreement, scientists can check their facts, they can observe the world, through experiments, and this will tell them which of their theories is correct (or at least which ones are wrong). However, there is nothing that we can observe, according to this third argument, which will settle disputes about values.

• The fact that there is disagreement in other branches of knowledge (like science, law) is merely contingent; it just happens to be that we do not know for sure what the truth is. In principle, however, we can find out the truth about scientific questions, and prove it. Similarly, in law, even if we cannot establish conclusively whether someone is guilty of murder or not, there is a fact of the matter – either he did it or he didn’t. In other words, in both science and in law, there is an objective fact which we could someday discover.

• Moral non-cognitivism: Moral issues, on the other hand, don’t just happen to be unproved – they are unprovable in principle. According to this view, we could never find out the truth about, say, whether abortion is right or wrong, because there is no corresponding objective
The fact that we could discover. Moral issues involve no “matter of knowledge”, no “matter of fact.”

**Hume**: No matter how deeply we examine, say, murder, we cannot find that matter of fact which we call “vice”, we find only “passions, motives, volitions and thoughts.” All we find is a feeling of disapproval which lies in us, not in the object itself. That is, there is nothing which is ‘wrong’, ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ in murder itself.

### Objectivism and Moral Realism

If we start ethics with the assumption that subjectivism or relativism is true, we are not going to get very far, as these positions seem to imply that there just is no point of discussing morality, since there is no moral truth we could ever reach and agree upon. Therefore, historically, many moral philosophers have attempted to refute subjectivists and relativists. The opposite view to moral subjectivism is moral objectivism, and one version of this is moral realism.

**Moral realism**: the belief that the words we use to make moral evaluations (e.g. wicked, generous) somehow point to real properties of people and actions. This view suggests that there are moral facts, people or actions are objectively good or bad.

- E.g. If I am wicked, this property belongs to me, in the same way as the property of being dark-eyed, say. Whether you see me as having dark-eyes or not does not depend on your feelings or beliefs, and neither does it depend on which society you were brought up. My dark-eyes are a real property of mine. Similarly, if I am wicked, moral realists say that this is an objectively real property of mine, or of my actions.

Moral realism, however, is a hard theory to defend (in fact, Graham doesn’t say much about it). The problem is that, whereas, with natural properties (like dark eyes) we can easily see them and confirm their existence, the whole issue of disagreement about morality arises because there do not seem to be moral properties we can observe.

#### Arguments against moral properties:

1. **J L Mackie** describes moral properties (if they exist) as **queer**:
   - Unlike other properties they cannot be perceived, i.e. we cannot see, touch, or measure goodness say, or wrongness.

2. **Harman**: They have no explanatory role in our observations: i.e. we do not have to appeal to moral properties to explain what we do observe. Say we observe a murder, and describe it as an evil action, we can explain this evilness by appealing to our psychological states, our social conventions, laws etc.

   - E.g. when I see a green desk, I assume that I see it as green because the desk is actually green – it has a property which explains my observation. There is no other way I could explain my observation. However, when I see an evil action, I do not have to assume that the property of evil actually lies in the person, I can explain it through my own feelings of disapproval, or through society’s disapproval, or the law it breaks etc.
[C.S. Does this argument work? Today we know that properties such as colour are not objectively ‘in the world’ but rather highly dependent on our physiological make-up, e.g. the structure of our eyes, and other animals, for instance, perceive the world in black and white. Therefore, aren’t such properties just like moral ones, in that their source resides in us, not in the object? Are all properties like that, including Graham’s example of ‘heat’?]

3. The naturalistic fallacy³: Even if we could see moral properties, that is, even if there were facts like “killing is wrong” they could not tell us what to do – they “lack action guiding force.” This one needs some more explanation.

The ‘Naturalistic Fallacy’ (or the ‘Is-Ought’ problem):

Hume showed that the move from “is” to “ought” is logically invalid; no matter how much information I gather about any particular state of affairs, I cannot infer anything about what I should do. There is no way to logically derive a conclusion with the verb “ought to” or “should” from premises with the word “is.”

E.g. Prem 1: Killing is wrong.
     Prem 2: Euthanasia is a form of killing
     Concl: Therefore we should not euthanize.

Since both premises are about facts, i.e. about the way things are, the only conclusion we can infer validly from them must be another assertion with the verb ‘is;’ it must be another fact, not a value. If we try to conclude something about what we should do, we have committed a fallacy.

Compare with the following:

Prem 1: Sprinters run fast.
Prem 2: John runs fast.
Concl: Therefore, John eats a lot.

Just as we cannot suddenly switch the verb from ‘run’ to ‘eat’, we cannot infer an ‘ought’ from premises about the way things ‘are’. Therefore “statements of fact” including those about moral properties – e.g. “x is wrong” – cannot have “prescriptive implications” – e.g. “you should not do x.”

[C.S: An important point, which we will see when we come to moral rationalism (see below), is that this fallacy does not include cases where (at least) one of the premises involves a ‘should’ e.g.:

Prem 1: Killing causes harm to others
Prem 2: People should not cause harm to others
Concl: Therefore, you should not kill

Therefore, the naturalistic fallacy is NOT saying we can never argue about morality. The issue is rather, how to reach conclusions about morals from facts alone.]

³ Strictly speaking, the “Naturalistic Fallacy” was the problem pointed out by Moore which we see below in his Open Question (another name for the Naturalistic Fallacy). What Hume described is better described as the “Is-Ought (or Fact-Value)” problem. However, so many philosophers (including Graham) conflate these two problems, that A’ level students needn’t worry about it too much.
Moore’s Open Question Argument

We have seen that if moral properties exist, they cannot be observed, and they cannot seem to tell us what to do.

A common approach in moral realism is to identify moral properties (good, right, wicked, evil...) with natural properties — e.g. x is good because it brings happiness or pleasure, x is right if it respects the well-being of others, it is wrong if it harms other. Since pleasure, well-being and harm are observable, this is one way of defending the idea that there are moral facts, objective moral properties. We can tell, objectively, whether my actions bring about more happiness or not, and if we know that happiness is good, then we can also say, objectively, whether my actions are good or not.

But, as Moore pointed out for any natural property we might pick (including happiness, pleasure, well-being, harm) we can always ask “Is it good?” (Is it bad? etc.) This is the open-question that Moore points out. For this reason, goodness, badness and other moral properties (if there are such things) cannot be identified with natural ones.

You’d think that from this Moore would infer that moral values are not properties at all. However, he doesn’t; instead, he argues that goodness and other moral values are non-natural properties.

[C.S. Note that Moore is a moral realist – even though he understands that values are not natural properties, he still believes they are properties (i.e. objective facts about things) of some sort]

Moore’s moral realism

Even though he understands that moral properties are not (like) natural ones, Moore does not give up on the idea that they exist. Instead, he explains them as follows:

- Moral properties are non-natural (see above)
- Moral properties are indefinable, like some natural properties such as yellow. Even though we all know what yellow is, we cannot define it in an objective way without appealing to our experience of yellow, i.e. the way it appears to us.

[C.S: is yellow really indefinable? Couldn’t we say something like “yellow is the colour that is perceived when light with a frequency within the range of [whatever yellow’s wavelength is] falls upon the retina.”]

- Moral properties are knowable through intuition, even though they cannot be perceived. According to Moore, we have this special faculty (i.e. ability, or capacity) of moral intuition.

Graham’s objection to Moore’s moral realism:

The introduction of a faculty of moral intuition does not really tell us anything useful.

If the naturalistic fallacy shows that we cannot infer value judgments from natural facts by means of ordinary perception, the introduction of ‘non-natural’ facts and a special evaluative ‘intuition’ simpl[y] shrouds the whole issue in mystery (p. 10).
In other words, Moore’s moral realism seems to be saying ‘there are these objectively real moral properties, that is, moral facts that exist out there in the world. Unfortunately, we cannot see or perceive them in any way, and we cannot even say precisely what they are. We cannot identify them with any natural property like happiness, or well-being. However, we have this special faculty, moral intuition, by which we are capable of knowing them.’

[C.S: How would we know whose moral intuition to trust? As the subjectivists and relativists have pointed out, what is right for me, or for my culture, is not necessarily right for another. Does that mean my moral intuition is right, and others’ is wrong? Or do we have different intuitions? In short, we seem to be right back where we started, and Moore’s non-natural properties have not made things any clearer.]

**Moral Rationalism**

It seems that our problem has arisen because there are two separate domains; the world of facts (objective, observable, stated in terms of ‘is) and the world of values (subjective/ relative, not observable, stated in terms of ‘ought’ or ‘should’). The ‘Is- Ought’ problem and Naturalistic Fallacy seems to imply that reason cannot cross over from facts to values. This has led subjectivists and relativists to think that we can only apply our reason to matters of fact, and that values cannot be reasoned about.

**Moral rationalism:** is the view that we can reason about moral matters. To see why, we have to think about how reason works.

**Reasoning based on the relation of ideas**

**Hume** showed that reason can operate on the relation of ideas as well as about facts. Obvious examples of this are maths and logic.

[C.S: Here are a couple of examples:]

*E.g. 1: 2 + 2 = 4*

*Over here “2”, “4,” the “+” and “=” functions are not anything that can be observed in the world, they are rather abstract entities, ideas that correspond to nothing empirical. There is no fact that corresponds to the number 2, or to the function +. Still, as the very existence of maths shows, we clearly can use our reason about them in a rather sophisticated way.*

*In fact, contemporary mathematics also contains alternative models of reality, where space is seen as being curved, multidimensional etc. Even if these extra dimensions of space actually exist, we definitely do not perceive them. Yet, mathematicians can work out complex calculations about them, even though they cannot check any corresponding facts, because such things probably do not exist at all. This is one example of what Hume may have meant by ‘the operation of reason upon ideas.’*

*E.g. 2: Jabberwockies are dangerous creatures*

*Dangerous things should be avoided.*

*Therefore, jabberwockies should be avoided.*
This argument is absolute nonsense; there are no such things as jabberwockies. And yet, I can easily
tell that the argument is perfectly valid; I can apply reason, that is, even to a premise about a non-
fact (a jabberwocky) and reach a valid conclusion. Again, this is reason operating on ideas rather
than facts. I can relate the idea ‘jabberwocky’ to ‘dangerous creatures’ etc. without having to check
whether jabberwockies exist and are in fact dangerous.]

Reasoning about morality based on the relation of ideas

Graham’s Hypothesis (2): Perhaps premises about values could also be true in virtue of the
relation of ideas and we can reason about ethics in this way. For example:

(Prem. 1) You promised to do x
(Prem. 2) Promises (are things which) ought to be kept
(Concl.) Therefore, you ought to do x

This argument is based on the relation of ideas, because the idea of ‘promise’ includes the idea of
‘(something which) ought to be kept.’ In fact, we could say that a promise is defined as something
that should be kept, (just like the number 4 is defined as 2 + 2) and therefore premise 2 is
analytically true – i.e. we see its truth when we analyze the concept of promising and discover that it
includes “should be kept” as part of its meaning.

Logically, this argument about promising is perfectly valid, and therefore, we can arrive at a moral
conclusion based upon reasoning.

That a ‘promise’ means something that ‘ought to be kept’ can easily be seen. Now Graham turns to
the question of whether there are other moral terms which contain values in their meaning, and to
do so, relies on Searle.

Searle on deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’

Searle distinguishes between two types of rules:

Regulative Rules: These regulate pre-existing behavior, that is, there is some sort of activity which
people engage in, and later on, humans decided upon certain rules to regulate this behaviour.

- Eating, for example, is something that we have always done, later on we invented table
manners which impose regulations on how we ought to do this

Constitutive Rules: These create a particular type of behaviour, that is, the fact that there are these
rules and we follow them is what accounts for that particular behaviour. Without the rules, there
would not be that behaviour.

- Without the rules of chess, for instance, there would be no such thing as chess; because
we have the rules, we act in a certain way which we call ‘playing chess.’ This is probably
true of all the games we play.
- Some moral behaviour, like promising, is also this way. There would be no means of
promising anything without the rule that we should keep promises; the rule is what
makes a promise what it is.
- Other examples Graham gives are marriage, and the use of money
You could object that marriage and the use of money also regulate pre-existing behaviour – namely sex and procreation, and the accumulation of wealth. Before there was the institution of marriage, people engaged in sex and had children and later on we came up with the rules which stipulate that we can have sex only with one person, of the opposite sex, etc. and that fathers must support their children etc. Similarly, before they started to use money, people accumulated material goods; they farmed, took from nature, stole, etc. Then, we invented money to regulate this activity.

Besides promising, are there any other types of moral behaviour of which the rules are constitutive?

Graham’s Moral Rationalism

Graham’s conclusion is that we can reason about moral matters, because some moral principles concern relations between ideas (as we saw above in the argument about promising).

Moral rationalism believes that reasoning about morality is no different from reasoning in general. We need to:

 ✓ Pay attention to facts (premise 1 in the argument about promising)
 ✓ Understand what concepts mean (premise 2)
 ✓ Combine these in logically valid arguments

Of course, this does not mean that our reasoning will be absolutely conclusive.

[C.S. e.g. we could always question whether promises ought always to be kept and what sort of circumstances might exempt us from having to keep them]

This is just the same as in legal reasoning, which does not provide irrefutable proof, and does not always even provide a solution.

However, despite this shortcoming

● We needn’t say (like subjectivists, or relativists) that reason is useless when it comes to morality.
● Reasoning about moral issues is in fact the best way to tackle them, provided we don’t expect irrefutable proof.

Objectivism vs. Subjectivism

It is time to return to the problem with which we started, the issue of subjectivism. Graham divides this into two:

1. **Hard Subjectivism**: the belief that in moral issues there are **never** any right answers
2. **Soft Subjectivism**: the belief that in moral issues there are **often** no right answers

These correspond to two forms of objectivism:

3. **Hard Objectivism**: In moral issues there are **always** right answers
4. **Soft Objectivism**: In moral issues there may sometimes be a right answer
(1) and (3) are far too dogmatic- why should we assume from the start that there is or is not an answer? The rational thing to do is to inquire into whether or not there can be progress in moral discussions. (2) is unhelpful unless we know which questions have an answer, and to find out, we need to investigate by using reason.

That leaves (4), which is Graham’s underlying assumption throughout the rest of the book. Even though we may not find an answer, we at least clarify the issues by investigating.
Chapter 2 - Egoism

Instrumental and Intrinsic Value

Ethics can be summarized as the attempt to answer the question “how should I live?” or, “what is the best sort of life?” (Q1)

The most common answer is – “a life where I am rich and famous”

[C.S. Is this really as common as Graham believes? How many of us really aim to be rich and famous? How many of us gave it as a reply to the question “what do you really want out of life?”]

But: Graham says that this answer is ‘logically incomplete’ – what does this mean? To understand, we need to think about the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value.

E.g. Being rich means having money. But, Graham says, money in itself has no value; the value it has depends on its capacity to purchase other goods, it also depends on financial markets, the value of other currencies etc.

[C.S. For instance, in Zimbabwe, you could be a millionaire and still be living in poverty. Once, the Zimbabwean dollar was worth more than the U.S. dollar, whereas nowadays millions of them won’t even fill your stomach (1 loaf of bread costs 10 billion Zimbabwean dollars). In fact, this money is so worthless now, that people burn paper notes in their fireplaces, in order to keep warm.]

Graham suggests we think about how useless the currency of one country is in another country. If, say, I forget to exchange my Indian Rupees when coming back to Malta (rupees are not accepted anywhere here) they become completely worthless.

Therefore, money in itself has no value; it is only when we can exchange it for other things, that money becomes valuable.

The distinction being made here is expressed, in philosophy, in terms of intrinsic and instrumental value.

➢ Some things, like money, have instrumental value: they are valuable to us, only insofar as they are useful for attaining some other purpose. In other words, instrumental value means the value that something has as a means to obtaining something else.

[C.S. Other examples of things that are instrumentally valuable are:

- My computer (only valuable because it enables me to do other things, like type these notes)
- Medicine (nobody likes taking medicine just for the sake of it, it is only worth taking, because it restores our health)
- Your studies? (Of course, this depends on how you look at it. If you see them as a means to getting a job then you value your studies instrumentally,)]

➢ Things which have intrinsic value are valuable for their own sake, in themselves. When someone asks – ‘why do you value x?’ – if x is something you value intrinsically, there will be no answer; you’ll have to say “I just do.”
Here are some examples of things valued intrinsically:

- **Happiness** – Normally we don’t want to be happy for any other reason except to be happy; it seems silly to ask “why do you want happiness?”
- **Friends** – true friendship means valuing your friends in themselves, for their own sakes, and not because they do your H.W., making you feel better when you’re down etc.
- **The Good** – Aristotle believed that this was the ultimate intrinsic value; everything we do, we do because we are ultimately aiming at the good.

So, to return to our question (Q1); why is the claim “the best life is one where I am rich and famous” logically incomplete?

This is because being rich (i.e. having money) is an instrumental good; and we haven’t said anything about what is intrinsically good. In other words, even if we had billions to spend, there still remains the question, “how should we spend this money?” I will spend it on shoes because I find shoes and looking good intrinsically valuable while you might donate it to charity because you value human life intrinsically. Whose is the best life? Until we determine what should be valued intrinsically we will not have answered that question.

Being famous is similar; we have not yet said what one should aim to be famous for. We can see that fame is not intrinsically good if we imagine being famous for doing badly in exams, for having a bad reputation, famous for being hideously ugly etc. Again, therefore, our answer to “what is the best sort of life” is incomplete; we have to specify what one should aim to be famous for.

**Hypothesis 1**: Perhaps what is missing in our answer to Q1 is a reference to our desires? That is, the best sort of life is one where rich enough to buy whatever we want to buy, or one in which we are famous for whatever we want to be famous for.

**Graham’s Objection**: But this means that we do not have to include fame or richness in our answer to Q1 – we can simply answer “the best sort of life is one in which I get what I want.” This is the answer that is traditionally given by egoism.

**Egoism, Subjectivism and Selfishness**

**Egoism and Subjectivism**

We must distinguish between two different philosophical positions:

- **Subjectivism**: what makes x valuable is the fact that someone wants it. That is, the source of value is the valuer, the subject (as seen in chapter 1), or human feeling in general.
- **Egoism**: What makes x valuable for me is the fact that I want it. Here the discussion is not about subjectivism or objectivism. Even if values were objective, egoism claims that this does not mean I will necessarily value these things. Egoism claims that I only act rationally when I do what matters to me.

A problematic version of egoism can be found in Plato’s dialogues represented by Callicles (Gorgias) and Thrasymachus (Republic). Graham describes it as follows:
“It is our desiring things which makes those things valuable, and ... the good life, consequently, consists in being successful at getting what you want... regardless of how this affects others” (pp. 20-21)

For example, if one has a choice between being honest (which we assume is objectively valuable) versus doing well in one’s career, why should anyone choose the former? Being an egoist will advance my interests more than being honest, and therefore seems to be the more rational thing to do according to this version of egoism – which, as we will see below, is actually better described as selfishness.

[C.S. Students might like to think about cheating in exams, supposing that they could do so easily and there was absolutely no chance of their ever getting found out. Why would a rational person choose not to? Why should one choose honesty over a better grade, given that better grades will lead to better jobs, more money and ultimately more happiness? ]

**Egoism and Selfishness**

Here, then, we see another distinction, i.e.

- **Egoism**: the best life is one where I get what I want; I am rational only when I do what matters to me (which can also include promoting other people’s happiness).
  - For example, I might give money to the poor and still be acting in my own interests, if the situation of the poor matters to me, e.g. I pity them. However, according to egoism, the important thing is that I act this way because I want to.

- **Selfishness**: (the ‘problematic’ version described above) the best life is one where I get what I want, irrespective of the negative consequences to others (i.e. other people’s happiness can never be part of what I want to achieve).
  - A selfish person has no interest in anyone else, and will therefore not give money to the poor, will cheat in his job etc.

The way we have described egoism – the best life is one in which you get what you want, whatever this is, and even if it includes promoting that which others want – it seems that nobody could disagree with it.

However, Graham raises the following objections:

- Egoism is still uninformative as an ethical theory because it does not tell us what we ought to want.
- Egoism is necessarily true if, in a sense, we can only ever do what we want to.

Is it true that we can only do what we want to do? This is the claim made by [psychological egoism](#).

**Psychological Egoism**

**Psychological Egoism**: people (can) only do what they want to – i.e. all our actions are motivated by something and this motivation always refers to some particular desire. In other words, people act only out of self-interest.
Objection: aren’t there lots of cases where we do things we don’t want to? E.g. making polite conversation when one is tired, being tortured.

Hume: Consider a mother whose child is sick and who spends so much time looking after it, that she loses her own health. Can we say that the mother acts out of self-interest?

[C.S. other examples which may be a bit more familiar to us are going to lessons, going to the dentist, clearing up one’s room etc. Do we really want to do these things?]

Reply: We do want to do these things, in a sense, if not for their own sakes, then for some other reason (i.e. we value these activities instrumentally). There must be a sense, according to psychological egoism, in which we want to do these things.

[C.S. E.g. I may not feel like a lesson, but at the same time, I do not want to miss what the teacher says, so in the end, I decide to attend. I value lessons instrumentally, as a means, perhaps, to passing exams. If I didn’t value lessons at all, according to psychological egoism, I simply wouldn’t go. Similarly, most of us do not really enjoy going to the dentist, but we enjoy having toothaches even less. Therefore, going to the dentist is based on what we want, i.e. what we value intrinsically (healthy teeth in this case). To take Hume’s example, there must be a sense in which the mother wants her child to be healthy more than she desires her own health.]

Graham’s Objection 1: The position of psychological egoism has now been changed, in such a way that it assumes the truth of psychological egoism, in other words we are begging the question (a fallacy). We are no longer making the simple assertion “people do only what they want to” – a claim which could be shown to be true or false. Instead we are saying “there must be a sense in which whatever people do, they do because they want to” and this assumes that psychological egoism is true, so it cannot be used to support psychological egoism.

[C.S. This is only a minor point of Graham’s, so don’t spend too much time on it.]

Objection 2: Psychological egoism is using ‘want’ in a very special way, which it is not entitled to do. That is, it identifies wants with things we only value instrumentally, as a means to something else, which is what we really want. But can I say that “I want to go to the dentist” if the fact is I am dreading it, and all that I really want is to get rid of my toothache?

[C.S. Suppose (1) I am being held at gun point, and my options are to kill a five year old child or get killed. I choose, reluctantly, to kill the child. Psychological egoists will say ‘there is a sense in which you wanted to do that’ and that is true only to the extent that I wanted to kill that child more than I wanted to die. But is it fair to say ‘you must have wanted to kill her’ when it is clear I have acted under compulsion?

The objection does not only apply to extreme cases such as this; what about (2) people who spend twenty years looking after sick parents out of a sense of duty, (3) people who are automatically altruistic, even when it goes against their own interests, because they have been brought up that way? Such actions could actually conflict with what they really want.]

Psychological Egoism’s Reply: The word ‘want’ means that there is some kind of motivation behind such actions
[C.S. Remember that ‘actions’ do not include everything we do, but just those things which we intend to do. That is, automatic impulses, habits, and biological processes do not count as actions. So of course, the fact that I may have no motivation to sneeze, say, does not count as an argument against psychological egoism, since sneezing is an unintentional process.]

Rejoinder and Graham’s conclusion: We can now see that psychological altruism is ‘an empty claim.’ If by ‘wanting’ they simply mean ‘having some motivation,’ then obviously, in that sense I ‘want’ to do everything I do, since every action has some motivation or other. But this is not what we mean by ‘want.’ To want something means to have an inclination, or desire for it, to feel like it, or to feel good about it.

That is, psychological egoists are relying on the ambiguity in their use of the word ‘want’ in order to:

1. First, they make a claim that sounds philosophically interesting (‘People only ever do what they want’ where ‘want’ is used in the usual sense of ‘what I find most pleasing’).
2. Then they defend that claim by changing their use of the word ‘want’ (I want to do x = I have some motivation to do x). However, we have now got a necessarily true, but trivial claim.

Rational Egoism

Rational Egoism is the much stronger claim that people ought to do what they want, in the sense of ‘what they find pleasing’ or ‘what they desire.’ The only rational thing to do is what you want, i.e. the only good reason for doing anything is that you want to do it.

How do rational egoists defend this claim? Well, it appears they might not even need to, because since I already want to do something, there seems to be nothing more that I need say about it. The burden of proof, that is, is on those who want to say something different (Graham calls them ‘moralists’); those who argue that (sometimes) I ought not to do what I want to.

[C.S. An example - Suppose I have a dilemma. What I really want to do is laze about listening to music, but I am falling behind on my philosophy essays. How do I solve this moral dilemma? Well, since I already want to listen to music, I don’t have to find any other reason to defend this choice. It is up to others (those who believe I have a moral obligation to hand in my essays on time) to show that I ought to do my essay instead.]

Graham: “By the very nature of the claim it makes, rational egoism gives us reason to accept it…”

[C.S. Are you convinced by this? What if I find torturing kittens pleasing, and I desire to do so? Don’t rational egoists need to give some sort of defence of the claim that I ought to do this? Is the fact that I want to enough for them to reach this conclusion?]

In fact Graham goes on to raise this very objection]

Objection: “Rational egoism is repugnant to most minds” – that is, because it suggests we ought to do what we want, even if this involves something harmful to others, most of us do not accept it, and it goes against most traditions in ethics (Greek, Jewish, Christian)

Nietzsche and the Will to Power

[C.S. It might be worth thinking about why we find such a moral philosophy as egoism hard to swallow. Many of us were brought up in traditions were we are told ‘love one another,’ ‘put others before ourselves,’ ‘turn the other cheek’ and so on. If nothing else, most of our parents have raised us to believe that we should do what they tell us to! Therefore, when we hear the rational egoists say “you ought to do what you want to do” it sound either a) positively liberating b) somewhat scary, as it goes against everything we have been told so far]

A short note on Nietzsche

**Nietzsche** was a philosopher who was not afraid shocking others or of going against tradition. He wrote passionately against Christianity and traditional morals, which he saw as being for the weak.

To understand Nietzsche we have to understand his times. Nietzsche lived at around the same time as Charles Darwin, and experienced the revolution in thinking that Darwin brought about. Nietzsche would have heard about the famous debate at Oxford, in 1860, where the Bishop of Oxford tried his best to refute evolution and was ridiculed by men of science. His claim that “God is dead” within this context is not meant to be taken literally, but can be compared to “the king is dead” and signifies a new epoch in history where mankind is no longer intellectually and morally enslaved by religious dogma and church authorities.

Unfortunately for himself, Nietzsche was far ahead of his times in his thinking, and during his lifetime he had very few readers. The story is that he went mad at the end of his life; although it could be he was suffering from syphilis. After his death his popularity began to grow, and it is widely known that his works were favoured by Hitler. What is not so commonly known is that Nietzsche inspired the German communists as well as anarchists. That is, there is nothing inherently fascist in his writing, and in fact, he had even criticized strong German nationalism and anti-Semitism.]

Nietzsche’s purpose was to show that there are important questions to be addressed, now that we can no longer simply rely on religion to answer them. What are these questions?

Without religion, the “whole foundation on which traditional values are built has been destroyed” (p. 28); that is, he believed that we need to start thinking again about value, and the meaning of life.

[C.S. Remember this is the 19th Century, where until a short while ago, religion had played a large part in human life]

Nietzsche begins on this project and his approach contains three important ideas

1. The will to power
2. The Übermensch
3. Eternal recurrence
Nietzsche’s egoism: The Will to Power

Nietzsche believes that what motivates people is ‘the will to power’ or “the desire to prevail in the circumstances of struggle that are an essential part of the human condition.” (p. 29)

[C.S. Notice that power is not just what politicians or policemen have; power includes even the ability, for instance, to buy what I want, or to have influence on my friends. The will to power implies that there is always a tendency to want to increase this, to want to expand oneself, so to speak, even at the cost of one’s life. This is why people generally want money and fame, or why nations go to war with each other. It is a quest for glory or greatness.

Nietzsche is clearly influenced by Darwin’s theory of natural selection; he believes that life (human and non-human) is characterized by struggle, and that any living being flourishes at the expense of another. There is a constant battle for resources (food, territory, mates) and humans and animals compete with each other for these. Yet it is not just the will to live that makes organisms struggle, but the will to dominate and overcome others, and this is why living beings often take huge risks with their lives in order to find a mate, say, or to gain some territory.

Nietzsche celebrated this competition; he found the idea of giving up one’s own interests in altruism both repulsive and unnatural. He saw traditional morality as somewhat perverse, because it encourages us to go against our natural behaviour, which is to try to obtain more power.]

Therefore, for Nietzsche, one ought to do whatever will increase one’s power. This is the only rational motivation for acting, in his view, and here, then, we can see Nietzsche’s egoism.

- The good, for Nietzsche, is whatever increases power (i.e. strength, determination etc.)
- Happiness is found when the good is attained, i.e. when power is increased.
- The bad is whatever decreases power (weakness, traditional morality etc.)

The Übermensch

Übermensch is usually translated as ‘overman’ (which is meaningless in English) or ‘superman’ (which reminds us of cartoons, and the Nazi’s attempts to create a superior race).

The Übermensch is a person in whom the “will to power is brought to perfection.” He (/she) is:

- Strong, highly cultured and skilled
- Knows how to be perfectly natural
- Strong enough to be completely free
- Tolerant out of strength
- Someone to whom nothing is forbidden except weakness
- Someone who determines the meaning and value of life for himself.

As examples of Übermensch Nietzsche gives Goethe, Wagner, and Julius Caesar.
Eternal Recurrence

“…matter in the universe is finite and the number of configurations it can assume are finite, whereas time is infinite. It follows that any configuration of matter will recur... and recur, again and again for all eternity.” (p. 32)

[C.S. Think of the atoms that make up your body. Before you were born, they formed other things and at the end of your life these atoms will disperse and go on to make up other things. This process of forming things, breaking up again, and re-forming other things goes on eternally, because time never started and will never end. That is, there is no beginning and no end to this process. But there are only certain number of atoms in the universe, which are always involved in this process of building bodies and breaking up again. This means that those atoms will sooner or later join with each other again to make up the same configuration which is your body! This follows because there is enough time in eternity for every single possible configuration to occur by chance, and then to occur again, still through nothing but chance.

If you think of atoms as the coloured squares on a Rubik’s cube and imagine you have all of eternity to go on turning the sides of this cube. Even if you start off with a random configuration, sooner or later (probably much later!) you will end up solving the puzzle by accident and lining up all the squares of the same colour. Of course, it would take you forever, but that doesn’t matter when you have eternity at your disposition. And if you go on turning the faces, you will mix up the colours again, but eventually, you will get them sorted out again, completely by chance.

What eternal recurrence amounts to is, that even if matter forms things randomly, the very fact that time never ends, and the fact that it is always the same matter ‘going round’ so to speak, means that we are going to get the same things over and over again.]

Nietzsche suggests that we should take eternal recurrence as a standard for judging our lives. Supposing I were to believe that this very life is going to be repeated over and over again. What sort of life would be fit for that – would we want to live a dull, meaningless life over and over, or one where we obtain power and glory?

Recap: Nietzsche’s egoism: the individual is to make sense of the world’s “chaos and uncertainty” by relying on his own will to power and strength.

Graham’s objections:

1. Why should we value the will to power? It is not enough to show that organisms actually do have it, we need to show that we ought to have the will to power

   [C.S. Remember the ‘is-ought’ problem?]

2. What sort of human life best exemplifies the will to power? ‘Power,’ ‘strength’ etc. are also instrumental values and we need to ask ‘power/ strength to do what?’
C.S. e.g. I could use the will to power in order to impose Christian morals on everybody else! Nietzsche himself would object to this, but he has not given us any indication of what power is to be valued for, i.e. what it is that is intrinsically valuable.]

Graham’s conclusion:

Nietzsche’s philosophy suffers from precisely the same fault as all forms of egoism – it gives us only an account of something which is instrumentally valuable, i.e. the will to power. But this can be used to gain precisely those things that Nietzsche criticizes – i.e. conventional morality.

In other words, because egoism does not tell us what to value intrinsically, its claim that ‘the best life is one where you get what you want’ could imply that a successful pedophile, or a drunkard who wants nothing but to get drunk, both live a good life.

Egoism’s reply: Perhaps this is true?

Graham’s rejoinder: What about, say, Buddhist monks, whose life-style involves the suppression of desires, and who aim to become without desires? According to egoism, this life-style is a mistake. But Buddhist monks claim that by doing this they gain the path to peace and happiness. Therefore, we have no reason to accept as dogma that getting whatever one wants means happiness.

Desires and Interests

Perhaps egoism will make better sense if we interpret ‘whatever one wants’ not as desires but as interests.

- **Desires**: things I long for, or have an inclination for (which can be harmful to me, that is, against my interests).
- **Interests**: Things necessary for my life and well-being (which I may have no particular desire for).

If we are egoists about our interests, we will sometimes not do what we desire. For example, we will not smoke cigarettes, even though we might really want to, because we realize their bad for us.

According to this version of egoism, the best life is not one where you get whatever you want, but one where you get what is in your interests over the long term.

In this way, we can respond to the counter-examples of the drunkard and pedophile.

This also makes space for some objective, intrinsic values. Some things are good for me as a matter of fact (health, good food, etc.) and others are not (smoking, drinking etc.).

Finally, there is also the possibility, now, that conventional morality could coincide with egoism. It is in my interests to follow conventional morality, for example, not to break the law, because otherwise, I will end up in jail, which is not good for me. It is in my interests to treat others well, so that they in turn treat me well.
Because this version of egoism appeals to self-interests, we do not need to spend much time defending it; it provides “the best possible basis for morality” (p. 37) according to Graham, because everyone understands that it is good to do that which is in one’s interests. In that sense, it is rational to do that which is in your interests.

There still remains the question, of course, ‘what exactly is in my interests?’ and therefore, we have still not answered Q1 – what is the best sort of life?

Some philosophers have answered this question by claiming that pleasure is in my interests and pain goes against my interests. This view is called **hedonism** and is the topic of chapter 3.
Chapter 3 – Hedonism

Recap of Argument:

Egoism is the view that the best life is one where you get whatever you desire.

Objection 1: We still don’t know what sort of desires would be best. Desires are subjective – e.g. I want money and you want fame...

Objection 2: This is because many desires are for instrumentally valuable goods (e.g. money) and so the question remains what should we want these things for, what is intrinsically valuable, or what is intrinsically good?

Conclusion: We need to find something which is objectively and intrinsically good.

Assertion: Promoting our interests is objectively and intrinsically good and therefore the best life is one in which I successfully promote my interests.

Reply to objection 1: Interests, unlike desires, are objective – there is a fact of the matter about whether x is good for me or not, which we could find out.

Reply to objection 2: Our interests are also intrinsically good – we want to do well, and be well, for its own sake, not for any other reason.

The question, then, is what exactly is in our interests? One reply is given by Hedonism – a philosophy which is closely related to egoism.

- **Hedonism:** “the belief that the point of living is to enjoy life and that accordingly the best life is to most pleasurable one” (p. 39). Pleasure is in our interests; pain goes against our interests.

The Cyrenaics

The Cyrenaics: Named after the founder (Aristippus of Cyrene); held that pleasure is the only natural good and pain the only natural evil. The good life is one filled with (bodily) pleasure.

- **Natural good** is opposed to conventional good.
- Pain is a natural evil because all people in all societies want to avoid it. For example, having cancer is universally seen as something bad. On the other hand, whether we fall into disgrace depends on our societies’ conventions, and not all societies regard disgrace as equally bad. Thus disgrace is conventionally, not naturally evil.
- If pain is a natural evil, then, it seems that its opposite, pleasure, must be a natural good.
- Pleasure seems to be a natural good because regardless of cultural background, everybody wants pleasure. Other goods, like honour, are conventional because not everybody agrees on their desirability – in some cultures people would kill to protect their honour, whereas in others honour is not given that much importance, or at least, there is disagreement on what honour actually consists of.
C.S. We can think of ‘natural’ here as similar to ‘objective.’ What Graham is suggesting is that the goodness of pleasure and evilness of pain is not subjective or relative, that is, it does not depend on individual preference, or on societal convention.

Further on, Graham will refer to Aristotle’s arguments to deny that pleasure is a natural good.

Assuming that pleasure is the only natural (objective, intrinsic) good, and in our interests, what sort of life provides the greatest amount of pleasure? According to the Cyrenaics, this is one where I enjoy bodily pleasures – food, drink, sex, etc.

Graham’s Objection: Most of these contain a mixture of pleasure and pain, or at least, to obtain bodily pleasures often brings about bodily pain.

Examples:
- To enjoy food, you need to suffer (a degree of) hunger
- Getting drunk is generally followed by a hangover.
- Sex often leads to HIV, and other STDs.

“The Cyrenaics’ ideal of the good life, therefore, is more attractive in theory than it is likely to be in real life. If we take it seriously we shall see that it is unrealizable and hence worthless as an idea.”

- Graham is saying here that it is impossible to live a life which is full of pleasure only, and without pain.

Reply: The connection between these pleasures and pains is contingent – i.e. it just happens to be that enjoying food requires hunger, or that drinking too much leads to hangovers etc., but is not necessarily true of all pleasures. Perhaps there are other forms of pleasure which do not happen to be bound up with pain?

The Epicureans

The Epicureans (named after Epicurus, whose main contribution to philosophy was not hedonism) held that the good life is one filled with pleasure that does not have accompanying pains.

- ‘Epicure’: someone who enjoys the finer things in life – good wine, good food, elegant clothes, etc. i.e. more ‘sophisticated’ pleasures – which are still bodily pleasures.

[C.S. Here are some examples of pleasure that lead to pain and other that do not:

Most of us would enjoy a pizza more than a gourmet meal, yet too much pizza leads to cholesterol and a feeling of being bloated, whereas a gourmet meal might be healthier and less heavy.

Again, many of us prefer Heavy Metal to classical music; yet, listening to Heavy Metal could lead to deafness, make us stressed or angry and so on. Classical music might not have the accompanying pains.]

Therefore, Epicureanism suggests we ought to give up those things that we automatically (naturally) find pleasurable, and learn to like other things, which do not lead to pain.
**Graham's Objection:** If these pleasures need to be learnt, they are no longer natural, and therefore, this version of Hedonism has lost its major appeal, namely that pleasure, being the only natural good, is universally recognized as good.

In other words, Epicureanism still needs to convince us that the things it sees as pleasurable, and therefore good (classical music, gourmet meals etc.) are really pleasurable and good. Although pleasure in the abstract might be universally recognized as good, it is not that clear what sort of things bring about most pleasure (and the least pain).

**John Stuart Mill on Higher and Lower Pleasures**

J.S. Mill also held that pleasure was a natural good, and pain a natural evil. However, the best life cannot be determined solely on the basis of pleasure.

He provided an example which has since become famous: He asks us to consider which is the best sort of life – that of a pig, which enjoys its life to the fullest and is perfectly satisfied eating, rolling about in the mud, and so on, or that of Socrates, who, despite his intellectual achievements, has the pain of knowing how little he knows?

Mill thought it was obvious that it’s better to be a dissatisfied Socrates, than a satisfied pig. But we cannot explain this if we assume that bodily pleasure is the only good thing in life. Therefore, Mill introduces the distinction between higher (better) and lower (worse) pleasures.

[C.S. It is possible to disagree with Mill’s claim that a dissatisfied Socrates’s life is better than a satisfied pig’s, and to insist that pleasure is the only good thing. On this, see below, on Sadistic Pleasures.]

**Graham's Objection:** If we can distinguish between better and worse pleasures, there must be some standard with which to do this, which is not pleasure itself. That is, there must be some other good besides pleasure.

[C.S. For example, suppose I say that the pleasure Socrates’ enjoys while doing philosophy is higher than that of the pig, because Socrates’s pleasure is intellectual, while the pigs is just bodily. Then, I have appealed to another good – being intellectual – to explain this difference. Or again, suppose I say Socrates’s pleasure is higher because through doing philosophy he enables other people to take pleasure in philosophy. Again, I have to mention another good – in this case, enabling others to enjoy pleasure – in order to explain why one form of pleasure is higher than another.

If pleasure is the only good thing, then the only way we could distinguish between better and worse pleasures would be to say those things that lead to more pleasure are better, and those which give less pleasure are worse.

This leads to the consequence that pleasures are ‘commensurable,’ that is, a higher pleasure can be substituted for a larger number of worse ones. Suppose eating a doughnut amounts to 1 unit of pleasure, and watching a good film amounts to 10. This would suggest that I can get the same kind of pleasure I get from watching a good film by eating 10 doughnuts, which is clearly absurd.
The fact that we can distinguish between better and worse pleasures means that pleasures are incommensurable, and that there must be some other good which I appeal to when I say that watching a good film is a higher pleasure than eating a doughnut. The question is, what exactly is this good?

Mill appeals to the quality of pleasures to distinguish between higher and lower ones and suggests that to find out what sort of things give the highest pleasures, we should ask people which they prefer.

**Objection 1**: If one person prefers opera to country music, does this not simply depend on her tastes? How do we know from this reply that opera is actually better? Even if we asked a hundred people, we would still not know that opera is ‘objectively’ a higher pleasure than country.

**Reply**: Mill seems to think that it is not just anybody’s opinion which counts, but that of ‘competent judges’. For example, he assumes that the pleasures of Socrates’ philosophical inquiries are higher than those of the pig’s life and would have dismissed anyone who disagreed as ‘incompetent’ or ignorant.

**Rejoinder**: However, even competent judges disagree between themselves about what gives the highest pleasure. It could be they simply have different tastes, and there may be no objective answer to the question – what gives the highest form of pleasure?

**Objection 2**: Even when competent judges agree about say, whether opera or country gives the highest form of pleasure, it seems that their answers are based on something else, another good which they take as a measure. For example, they might claim that opera is higher than country because it is a classical form of music.

**Conclusion**: What makes certain pleasures ‘higher’ than others is not pleasure itself, but something else. Therefore, (Graham’s thesis) there must be some other good besides pleasure, and strict hedonism, which claims that only pleasure is a natural good, is false.

**Sadistic Pleasures**

**Hedonism’s reply to Mill**: it might not be as obvious as Mill thinks that a dissatisfied Socrates’s life is better than a satisfied pig’s. We only think that the pig’s life is not a good one, because as humans, we happen to have different interests and abilities. But if we accept the claim that pleasure is the only natural good, then these interests and abilities do not come into it; and the pig’s life is better than Socrates.

**Graham’s Objection**: If we too accept that pleasure is the only natural good, this means we cannot distinguish between the pleasure a surgeon takes in saving a child’s life, and the pleasure a sadist takes in torturing a kitten.

[C.S. Here we see how strongly connected egoism and hedonism are. Egoism describes the best life in terms of wants or desires, while hedonism speaks in terms of pleasure, but if take desires to be directed at those things that give us pleasure, the difference seems negligible. In fact, Graham is making the same objection in each case – that neither egoism, nor hedonism tells us what we ought to want/ take pleasure in.]
Hedonism’s reply: Hedonism need not recommend sadistic lifestyles, as it is not necessarily selfish – i.e. it could recommend a life of a surgeon where pleasure is taken at helping others, and reducing their pain, especially since pain is seen as naturally evil.

Still, a consistent hedonist must claim that insofar as the surgeon and sadist both derive the same amount of pleasure, they both lead equally good lives, in the sense that they are equally enjoyable.

Graham’s rejoinder: The fact that sadists take pleasure in their activities is usually taken as a sign that their lives are worse than those of others, but hedonism is saying that the pleasure they derive makes it good in this sense. Therefore, hedonism goes against conventional wisdom.

Aristotle on Pleasure

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle claims that pleasure is good, and that the highest good is a kind of pleasure. However, before we can evaluate hedonism we have to know exactly what pleasure is.

[Here we see the influence of the Socratic method – the inquiry into definitions of words being used in philosophy.]

Pleasure so far has been used as the opposite of pain. However, there is an important asymmetry between the pleasure and pain.

- Asymmetry – the two are not exactly the same; they don’t follow the same pattern, they do not correspond exactly to each other and cannot be matched precisely with one another.

Pain can be either:

1. Bodily pain, which is located in a particular place in my body (e.g. my finger if I cut it with a knife). This sort of pain corresponds to a particular sensation.
2. Psychological pain, (e.g. someone says something unkind) which is not a sensation in my body. However, this is not the primary meaning of ‘pain.’

Pleasure is different:

1. Although some bodily sensations can be pleasurable, this does not make pleasure itself a sensation (in the way that pain is.) Food, drink etc. produce pleasurable sensations, but not pleasure itself.

[C.S. For example, although we could say “I have a pain in my neck,” or in any other part of the body, it would make no sense to say “I have a pleasure in my neck” – or in any other part of the body for that matter.]

Graham’s conclusion: While it is true that pain is a natural evil, because all animals and humans try to avoid it, it does not follow that pleasure is a natural good. What all people try to attain is not pleasure itself, but certain other things which happen to produce pleasurable sensations. We cannot know for sure that they want these things because they are pleasurable, we cannot say that they are seeking pleasure for its own sake.
[C.S. For instance, when a student of mine manages to understand something, this gives me some pleasure. But it would be wrong to say that the only reason I am teaching is because it gives me pleasure; pleasure just happens to be a very welcome side-effect.

Similarly, any activity you take seriously – such as attending Mass – might give you some pleasure. But that does not mean you do it for that pleasure. Therefore, what Graham is suggesting here is that there must be another good, besides pleasure, which is what we seek to achieve when we engage in such activities.]

2. Just as with pain, there are other things, besides bodily sensations, which can be pleasurable, e.g. a conversation, or a game of tennis.

The early hedonists’ mistake was to see pleasure as opposed to pain and since pain is usually understood as a bodily sensation, they consequently took pleasure to be also a bodily sensation.

Aristotle: “pleasure is not one thing,” that is, although all humans seek pleasures, they do not all seek one type of sensation. Some seek pleasure in sex, say, others seek the pleasure of doing sports.

Aristotle makes an important distinction:

- Some activities are done for the sake of the pleasure they produce and therefore, pleasure is the end of the activity which is different from the activity itself.

[C.S. Graham mentions sex as an example of this first type of activity; another example is taking drugs. The point is that the pleasure produced has to be ‘independent from the activity itself.’ In other words, if someone takes drugs, they don’t usual do it ‘just to take drugs,’ but for the high it produces. The pleasure produced is different from the activity.]

- Other activities have themselves as an end, and the pleasure comes from doing the activity itself.

[C.S. For example, you do sports, for its own sake, and not because it produces some independent pleasure. After playing a game of tennis, the chances are you’ll feel tired and hot, and there’s nothing inherently enjoyable about swinging a racket. Still, we say we enjoyed a game of tennis, and the enjoyment comes from the fact that we find tennis something that is worth doing.]

Summary: For Aristotle, pleasure is the end of all activities, and is not necessarily a bodily sensation. Pleasure is doing something for its own sake, to be “thoroughly absorbed in an activity,” “to regard it as a source of interest and value.”

Graham’s Conclusion: This means that there must be another good besides pleasure. If I value an activity intrinsically, i.e. for its own sake, I find it good, or interesting, independently of the pleasure it gives. It is not that I find tennis, philosophy etc. good only because they give me pleasure. Rather, I see these activities as something good, for another reason, and as a result, engaging in them gives me pleasure. From here, Graham turns to an important distinction - pleasure vs. happiness - and the next question we will address is ‘what is happiness?’
Chapter 4: Naturalism and Virtue Theory

Summary:

The hedonists believe if x produces pleasure, then x is good. If my life is full of pleasure, my life is a good one.

Aristotle showed that the reverse is true: if x is good, then x produces pleasure. If I lead a good life, it will be a pleasurable one.

So, what is it that makes a life, or an activity, a good one? Aristotle’s answer is eudaimonia.

- Eudaimonia is usually translated as ‘happiness’ – but it is better translated as ‘well-being.’ Importantly, it has a sense of engaging in an activity, i.e. to be doing something. A person who is eudaimonic “excels at all those activities and aptitudes that are characteristic of human beings” (p. 54) These include:
  - Healthy appetites/ fulfillment of good desires
  - Use of mental faculties/ rationality
  - Enjoying good relationships

The Rational Animal

For any type of living being, we can ask – “what kind of life is good for it?” All living beings need certain things in order to survive, and different forms of life require different things – a lion cannot survive on vegetables. A good life is more than just survival, however; if we imagine a dry withered plant, or a weak, sickly lion cub, we would not say it is doing well.

Eudaimonia, or ‘well-being,’ that is, involves not just survival, but flourishing. When a creature has those conditions which enable it to do well, we call this the good for that creature.

For example, plenty of sunshine and very little water are good for a cactus, but not for a lion. Meat, exercise and the company of other lions are good for a lion. With regards to the good life for humans, the question is, therefore, what are all the things that are required for humans to flourish, or to do well? Once we determine the good for mankind, we will know what it means to live well, or to be eudaimonic. The answer will involve two things:

1. The sort of activities that humans are naturally predisposed to.
2. The sort of conditions that make these possible- i.e. what people need in order to do what they do well.

Here we see the difference between Aristotle and other early philosophers.

- The hedonists and Plato looked for the good – i.e. one thing which is ‘good full stop’, or good for anything and everything.
- Aristotle sees good as relative to different forms of life – what is good for lions is no good for cacti, or for humans.

Importantly, although Aristotle sees the good as relative, this does not mean that he sees the good as subjective. It is an objective fact that meat is good for lions but not good for cacti, that is, it does not depend on our preferences, or feelings, but it is a discoverable matter of fact.

Aristotle’s view relies on a distinction in the way we use the word ‘good’: 
 Attributive: e.g. ‘this cake is good;’ ‘this music is good’ – here I am describing my preference or liking for this cake/ music.
 Predicative: e.g. ‘aspirin is good for headaches;’ ‘this is a good tennis racket’ – here I am describing something that I see as a fact; that aspirin makes headaches go away, or that this racket has tight strings, a good grip etc.

Aristotle uses ‘good’ predicatively. This means that when he says ‘a good person’ or ‘a good life’ he is describing something he sees as a fact and which is comparable to ‘a good tennis racket,’ or ‘a good computer.’

“A good person is someone whose life exhibits those features that are distinctively human excellences.” (p. 56) That is, to say that a person is good, we need to know what the typical characteristics of human beings are:

E.g.  
- A good tennis racket – has tight strings, a good grip…
- A good computer – has lots of RAM, a fast processor…
- A good cat – is healthy, has shiny fur, can catch mice…
- A good human – is what???

Once we have answered the question of what humans are like at their best, we will know the answer to what sort of life is the best one - namely, one where I have all the conditions to be the best person I can be.

Now we can understand why Graham’s chapter is called ‘naturalism…’ Unlike the egoists, hedonists and so on, Aristotle’s view of the good life is grounded upon biology. That is, his view of what a good life is for a particular type of creature is based upon the nature of that creature. Because of the cactus’s nature, sunshine is good for it, too much water is not.

What is the nature of human beings? Humans according to Aristotle are rational animals; hence the good for humans shares something in common with the good for animals (food, water, exercise etc.) and something specific to humans (using one’s rational faculty).

The Good for Human Beings

Aristotle claims, in *Nichomachean Ethics*, that the good life is ‘activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.’

 ‘Soul’ (psyche) means mind or rationality, rather than soul in the religious sense.
 ‘Virtue’ (arête) means excellence, rather than virtue is a moral sense.

Therefore, a better translation of Aristotle’s description of the good life is ‘activity of the rational mind in the best possible way,’ or as Graham puts it, “Aristotle’s conception of the good life is one in which we use our minds to make, and act, and think, in the best possible ways.”

o Why ‘make, act, and think?’ Although he picks rationality as the characteristic of humans, Aristotle does not think that a merely intellectual life is the good one for humans. Intelligence can be applied to a wide variety of activities, manual or physical as well as intellectual.

o In fact, Aristotle sees phronesis (practical reason/ wisdom) as central to the good life, rather than sophia (theoretical wisdom).

Those who lead good lives are “middle aged, well educated, financially secure, socially respected,” and “talented.”
- One cannot call a young person ‘eudaimonic’; for Aristotle, you can only tell whether a life has been a good one towards the end of this life. The very possibility that things might go wrong for a young person, later on in his life, means that young people lack eudaimonia.

[C.S. Here we see the difference between eudaimonia and happiness in our usual sense. Many people say that their youth was the ‘happiest time of their lives.’]

- If rationality is the main defining characteristic of humans, then a high level of education is needed in order to develop this faculty to its fullest.
- Being poor is a deficiency; just like we would not say that a hungry cat was doing well, a poor person is not flourishing either.
- Social relations are another defining characteristic of humans, and therefore, to do well we need to have a relatively high status in society.
- The good person is an all-rounder; he or she is accomplished (has arête) in many things, and does not specialize in a single activity or pursuit.

It is important for Aristotle that a good person excels at all of these things, not just one or two. Therefore, if I strive to make money and gain respectability, without paying attention to my intellectual development, I cannot be described as living a good life.

Aristotle’s version of ‘the good life’ does not seem to have the moral sense with which we understand the phrase. Importantly, Aristotle is not saying that these are his preferences, but that they are objectively good for humans. In fact, it seems to say nothing which we would not agree with – of course it is better to be rich, intelligent, talented, and respected, rather than poor, stupid, good at nothing, and hated by everyone.

**Ethics and Sociobiology**

Aristotle’s idea of ‘the good for’ is intimately bound up with the Greek concept of telos which has two senses:

1. The end (objective, aim) at which every kind of thing naturally aims.
   E.g.: An acorn’s telos is to grow into an oak tree.
   An oak’s telos is to become a healthy, flourishing tree

2. Telos also has the implication of ‘performing a function.’
   E.g.: A heart’s telos is to pump blood around the body
   The rain’s telos is to circulate water around the globe

Telos in the first sense might be easily understood for living beings. If the acorn does not develop into a healthy tree, if it is diseased, say, it has not achieved its telos, i.e. its final purpose, or its objective. To develop into a healthy oak, an acorn needs certain conditions (water, soil, sunshine, etc.) These conditions are good for the tree, and therefore, as we have seen, Aristotle’s idea of the good for a being is derived from biology.

However, what about the second sense? What is the function of an oak tree, a lion, or a human? Although manmade objects and parts of organisms seem to perform some specific role (e.g. a chair’s function is to be sat upon, the heart pumps blood) it does not seem to be the case that organisms have some specific role to play.
[C.S. If we consider ecological roles we might find a sense of telos for individual organisms and for entire populations and species too. E.g. the function of an earthworm is to recycle nutrients in the soil, the function of a tree is to take in CO2 from the atmosphere, the function of a population of foxes is to keep the number of rabbits in balance etc...]

Moreover, science shows that telos might be an outmoded concept. A lion is not the way it is because it is trying to achieve some purpose, or perform some function, but because of its genetic structure. Similarly, the very fact that humans have so many different ideas about what a good life is shows that there is no objective which we are naturally drawn towards achieving. If there was, then we would all agree about what sort of lives we should lead, just as we all agree that it is better for a tree to be healthy than to be diseased.

Aristotelian biology was influential for many centuries, however today it has been superseded by Darwin’s theory of evolution. Aristotle and mediaeval scientists believed that species were static, that is, that they had come into existence (or perhaps been created) in their current form, and had not changed throughout the millennia. Today we know that species have developed over time to reach their current form, and that they will continue to evolve due to changing environmental factors.

On the other hand, there might be some resources for Aristotelian thought in evolutionary theory. Evolutionary biology shows that certain characteristics of species evolved because they are useful for the survival of members of that species. For example, human rationality evolved because humans are lacking in natural defenses (they have no sharp teeth or claws) and so they need to use their intelligence in order to survive. Thus an intelligent human can be described as a good human because he/she is well adapted to survive. In Darwin’s term “survival of the fittest,” the word “fittest” refers to those individuals which are the best of their kind. Thus the ‘fittest’ human or lion can be thought of as one which has achieved its good, in Aristotle’s sense. The term telos can be reinterpreted so that to achieve one’s telos is to be a ‘fit’ individual in Darwin’s sense.

Aristotle’s ideas also fit very well with ethological concepts. Ethology (from the Greek ethos-character- the same root as ‘ethics’) is the study of animal behaviour – it examines the behaviour of animals in their natural environment and compares this to their behaviour in altered environments, where one or more factors are changed. What emerges is that animals flourish under certain conditions but not others, and in fact, their behaviour can become abnormal; they might be aggressive, or even self-destructive, under the wrong sort of conditions. For example, it has been found that a deficiency in iron can cause pigs to bite each other’s ears and tails; monkeys in an overpopulated habitat will attack and even kill each other. We can describe these conditions and behaviour as being objectively not good for that species and therefore Graham implies that, just as Aristotle believed, there might be some valuable resources for ethics in biology, even though Aristotelian biology is now obsolete.

Sociobiology is the combination of evolutionary theory and ethology. It has considerable philosophical importance as it seems to involve similar ideas as Aristotelian naturalism, as we will see when we consider a modern reinterpretation of Aristotle, i.e. Virtue Theory.

Virtue Theory

Virtue Theory (or Virtue Ethics) is a contemporary revival of Aristotelian ethics, and its most well-known representatives are Alistair Maclntyre, G.E.M. Anscombe and Philippa Foot. Virtue ethics, as the name suggests, focuses on virtues; that is, rather than looking for an abstract and somewhat
vague concept of the good, it examines what Graham calls “thick moral concepts” which are the virtues such as generosity, compassion, bravery, and vices like cowardice, meanness etc.

Virtue theory is most often contrasted with utilitarianism (or consequentialist ethics) and Kantianism (or deontological ethics). These will be covered later on, however, to anticipate we can say, in brief, that consequentialism determines whether an action is right or wrong, depending on the result or consequence of that action. Thus for utilitarianism, an action is the right one if it increases happiness for as many people as possible. Kantian ethics and deontology, on the other hand, tend to think of actions as right or wrong in themselves, without considering the results. In short, both of these approaches take the rightness or wrongness of actions to be the main question in ethics.

Virtue theory, on the other hand, regards character as being the main issue. What matters most is not what one does, but what one is. To be moral, one must be compassionate, and not unkind. Once we have developed these virtues in ourselves, virtue ethicists believe, the right actions will follow automatically. These virtues are intimately related to Aristotle’s concept of the good for humans – i.e. a person becomes the best sort of person (achieves his or her telos) when he or she has developed a virtuous character.

[C.S. isn’t there a problem here with the way ‘virtue’ is being used? If we understand arête in Aristotle’s sense of ‘excellence’ then of course the above claim makes sense. But are we justified in taking arête to be ‘virtue’ in our contemporary, moral sense? Who says that a generous, compassionate person (modern virtues) is better than a strong warrior (Homeric virtues)?]

Graham claims that there are three main advantages to virtue theory:

1. It provides a plausible alternative to ethical subjectivism and moral realism (p. 61). That is, when we talk about sunshine being good for a cactus, this is not merely subjective (we cannot disagree, there is an objective fact of the matter) and neither is this goodness a non-natural property in Moore’s sense (we can observe that sunshine helps the cactus to flourish).
2. Words that denote virtues are descriptive; they tell us something about the person being called brave or cowardly. This is an objective fact about the person.
3. As well as a descriptive element, words that denote virtues have an evaluative or normative element. Nobody would disagree (according to this view) that to be ‘brave’ is a good thing, whereas to be ‘cowardly’ is bad.

The second and third points show how facts and values can come together. If I run away from danger then it is a fact that I am cowardly, and this vice of mine has negative value. If I give lots of money to charity, then I am generous (fact) and this is good (value).

How can we say that virtues like generosity, kindness, altruism are good? Graham hints at the answer on p. 62 where he claims that this is “not because people happen to applaud them, but because of the facts of human nature – our vulnerability and dependence on others.” Richard Dawkins, probably the most famous sociobiologist, wrote a book called The Selfish Gene where he explains how morality and altruism evolved in humans. Because human children are so helpless at birth, they are utterly dependent on their mothers. This means that any females with genes for taking care of their children (generosity, kindness, altruism) are going to have more children that survive and therefore, their genes, including these genes for moral behaviour, will get carried into the next generation. Because mothers are so busy looking after children they are dependent on males. For this reason, a male who didn’t support his mate and offspring would not have many children who survive. Therefore the gene for moral behaviour contributes towards ‘fitness’ –
individuals who display moral behaviour have more chances of having their genes survive in later generations – and in this way we can see how the virtues might be said to be good, in the sense that they lead to human flourishing.

**The Natural as Norm**

Graham now starts to consider some objections to Virtue Theory as described above. The first is that, unlike other animals and plants, which have very determinate conditions which lead to their flourishing, humans can flourish in a wide range of environments (e.g. in Arctic ice, or in a desert; in overpopulated cities or in remote monasteries.) So, the question is, what is the natural environment and the natural way of life for humans?

One answer is to say that what is natural for humans is the sort of life-style we evolved in, i.e. ‘primitive’ hunter-gatherer societies, while our contemporary life-style is artificial or contrived.

The word ‘natural’ itself seems to have an evaluative dimension – when we buy ‘natural’ products, or go for ‘natural’ colours, we do this because we assume natural is good. But there are two problems here:

1. How do we distinguish the natural from the non-natural?

   A sociobiologist would say that what is natural for humans are the conditions which enable them to survive. However, city-dwellers and hunter-gatherers have both survived so this does not take us very far. Natural childbirth works as well as caesarian section does and so if we have a choice between a so-called natural option and a non-natural one, there is no obvious reason to choose the natural one.

2. How do we explain why natural is good, i.e. how does ‘natural’ get its evaluative sense?

   If a cow eats grass rather than meat, then we say grass is the cow’s natural food and is good for the cow, but meat is not natural and not good. However, cows cannot think about what they do, they eat what they eat instinctively, and have no choice in the matter. Humans on the other hand have a rational faculty (as Aristotle pointed out!) and have a choice in the matter. Our decisions are not just based on biological factors (that meat is nutritious for humans) but also on preferences (e.g. the taste), life-styles and, of course morals. Therefore, although we can say that meat is good for humans in the sense that it is natural for humans to eat meat and nutritious for them, we might argue that it is not good to eat meat for other reasons.

   [C.S. See Mill’s essay “On Nature” where he distinguishes between two senses of natural. In the first sense, everything under the sun is natural because it follows the laws of nature. To use natural in this sense as an evaluative term is meaningless, because that would mean that everything is good (hurricanes, AIDS, murder are all perfectly natural in this sense).

   In the second sense, ‘natural’ is contrasted with ‘man-made.’ But, if we use this sense as an evaluative term, this means that nothing humans ever do can be good. When humans started farming for example, this ceased to be ‘natural’ and therefore must be bad, if we understand ‘natural’ as an evaluative term.]

*Is the ‘Good for Man’ Good?*
So far, Graham has argued that Aristotle’s concept of the good for humans is not very useful because we cannot determine a single form of life which is naturally good for humans.

He now makes a second objection. What if the things that are good for humans are not objectively good, i.e. they are not good from a wider perspective? He brings in hunting as an example – while this is good for humans, it is not good for the animals hunted. Racism and xenophobia might have served an evolutionary purpose (perhaps those communities which were wary of foreigners had better chances of surviving) and therefore can be considered ‘good’ for those communities, however, we do not commend this sort of attitude these days.

[C.S. A more pertinent example might come from environmental issues. What is good for humans these days seems to contrast strongly with what is good for the planet and some environmental philosophers have even argued that the planet needs a drastic reduction in human population (which would be bad for humans) if it is to survive.]

In short, Graham says, even if we could say with certainty, what the good for humans is, we would still be left with the question, is ‘the good for humans’ good?

How could it not be? Well, one tradition which thinks of the natural as bad is Christianity – it supposed that we are naturally inclined to do evil, and that we have to strive against our natures to lead a moral life. Therefore, if ‘the good for humans’ is based upon what is natural for humans, there does seem to be at least the possibility that this is not good.

**Natural Good and Freedom**

The final and most important objection, however, which will lead us to the next chapter on existentialism, is that even if we did discover what is natural for humans we would be leaving out an important part of what it means to be human, that is, our radical freedom. The whole problem of the nature of humans arises because it is possible for us to reject nature (hence problems 1 and 2 above). Even if I knew with certainty say, that eating meat is natural and good for humans, I am able to reject meat (at the expense of my own health perhaps) as we saw above.

This radical freedom that I have seems to suggest that there is, perhaps, no such thing as human nature, that is, humans have no essential nature but can decide, to a certain extent, how and what they want to be (unlike other animals which can only be the way they are and cannot consciously alter their behaviour). This idea is expressed in the existentialist slogan “existence before essence.”
Chapter 5 - Existentialism

Kierkegaard and the Origins of Existentialism:

Kierkegaard’s thought

Kierkegaard used several pseudonyms (for different books and throughout the same book) and even published conflicting theories. He probably did this so that readers would not be tempted to think of him as authoritative, but would rather have to think for themselves, evaluating his arguments rationally, but also evaluating the emotions which they gave rise to. Therefore it is difficult to pin down exactly what Kierkegaard’s views were. However, we can find some consistency in his thought:

He believed that there are three ways of life - the aesthetic (i.e. artistic), the ethical, and the religious. They are mutually exclusive, which means that one cannot choose to live a religious and an ethical life for example; one has to choose only one way of life of these three. Therefore, life requires a radical choice on the part of the individual, who must decide how he or she will live. Three consequences of this idea are important for our purposes because they had considerable influence on Sartre and other existentialists.

1. The question “How shall I live? How shall I spend my life?” is the most important in philosophy; in Graham’s words, practical questions take priority over theoretical ones.

2. ‘Truth is subjectivity.’ That is, as living beings, we have to be subjective, we have to view the world and reality, from a particular perspective, and we cannot reach a purely objective truth. Even if we could, say, prove the existence of God objectively, this would make no difference to us, because we would still need to accept it subjectively, i.e. we would need to make it true for us, to accept it for ourselves. This is what Kierkegaard calls the ‘leap of faith.’

[C.S. We could think about the creationists as an example here. Although, evolution has been proved (objectively) true, creationists do not accept it; even though they know of all the rational arguments that support it they do not make it their subjective truth.]

To accept Christianity subjectively requires particular kinds of emotions; Kierkegaard mentions fear, dread, guilt and so forth. Our reaction to such emotions is to take that leap of faith and start believing in God; otherwise the only alternative would be to despair.

3. Therefore, even though religious truths are absurd, this does not mean ‘we can choose any old doctrine which takes our fancy.’

[C.S. For example, if I am experiencing guilt at having done wrong, it will not help much for me to start believing in the existence of an almighty purple elephant who likes tap dancing. Clearly this belief is at least as absurd as the idea that a benevolent, omnipotent God created me with all my faults, knowing that I would eventually sin. However, the first belief does nothing to mitigate my guilt, whereas the second, believing that God is a Father-like figure who will forgive my sins, could provide some relief from guilt.]

To have faith, according to Kierkegaard, we have to give up (to a certain extent) our intellectual understanding and rational capacities. For instance, if we find the idea of a benevolent God who
created an evil world logically impossible, we have to somehow put away this knowledge and, based on our emotions, take that leap of faith.

Kierkegaard’s objections to the rationalization of faith:

Kierkegaard (1813 - 1855) objected to Hegelianism, Lutheranism, and other Christian institutions because they try to make religion reasonable and respectable, whereas he believed that a true religion involves mystery, absurdity and paradox, and thus requires a ‘leap of faith.’ In other words, he held that religion cannot be made comprehensible through reason, and that if we attempt to do this, we have lost sight of what religious faith is all about, namely, that which is beyond our natural world, beyond our intellectual capacities ad understanding.

[C.S. This needs a pit of unpacking, as to understand fully what Kierkegaard objected to, we need to know about the traditional dichotomy that was perceived to exist between reason and faith, and how philosophers have tried to bring them together.

Reason vs. faith

The relation between reason and faith has long been an important issue in both philosophy and in theology. The two are problematic because one seems to exclude the other. If reason can show us objective truths, e.g. if I could find some proof of the existence of God, then there would be no need to have faith in such truths, because once one has attained them through reason one simply knows they are true (or so the story goes...). On the other hand, matters of faith often go against reason; e.g. how can an eternal God be incarnated as a (temporal) human being and then die on the cross? How can a human being, having died on a cross, be resurrected? Why does an omnipotent, benevolent God create a world which contains AIDS, terrorism, and all sorts of evils? All of these issues describe a paradox, i.e. they involve contradiction and defy logic or reason.

The contrast between faith and reason can be seen clearly even today in the conflict that often exists between the views of religious people and those of scientists. Richard Dawkins, for instance, comes down heavily on the side of reason and science and rejects all articles of faith. Such an attitude is often described as “scientism”; the belief that only science (and by extension, reason) can be used appropriately to evaluate particular claims and beliefs. Dawkins refuses to accept that there might be some things (the realm of the Supernatural, or God) about which science simply cannot have any say.

On the other hand, some religious people, such as creationists, for instance, have so much faith in the literal truth of the Bible that they refuse to accept the rational grounds for believing in evolution, and they continue to maintain that the Earth is only a few thousand years old, despite all the excellent reasons that science has provided for rejecting this view. All this shows that there seems to be an irreconcilable difference between science and faith.

Throughout the history of philosophy (and theology) there has been a consistent attempt to bring faith and reason in line with each other. During the mediaeval period, philosophy was seen as the “handmaid to theology” (ancilla theologae) in the sense that it aimed to explain, through reason, the beliefs and tenets of theology. In other words there was an attempt to rationalize the Christian faith, to make its paradoxes less paradoxical, and to somehow explain them through the use of reason. This attitude continues even today (e.g. see Pope John Paul II’s “Faith and Reason” where he writes
that faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit can rise to a knowledge of the Truth (and therefore of God).

Even in the world of science, there are those who try to reconcile faith and reason. For instance, some scientists report that they became convinced of the existence of God through their discovery and appreciation of the laws of nature. Newton, for instance, wrote that “This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being. (Newton 1687, *Principia Mathematica*). This is analogous to the so called “Argument from Design” - the idea that there could not have arisen such an intricate, orderly universe, without some Being who designed and/ or created it.

In short, faith and reason seem to be opposed to each other, and one of the most important projects in philosophy has been to reconcile them. It is to such projects that Kierkegaard objected.

**Hegel’s philosophy**

Hegel (1770 - 1831) was one philosopher who tried to reconcile faith with reason. He claims, for example, that philosophy is “essentially...rational theology.” He believed that rational thought processes could give humans the capacity to understand God, whom he referred to as “Absolute Spirit.”

Hegel was an idealist, which means that (like Plato) he believed ideas had reality, independently of any particular mind which happens to hold them. Such ideas can also be manifested in material things. For Hegel, God, or Absolute Spirit (i.e. an idea) manifests in this world, and by understanding this world, we can come to understand God. The world and its history is seen as the process of Absolute Spirit realizing itself.

Throughout history we see that certain ideas were manifested, broke down for some reason and then an opposing idea was manifested etc. For instance, the early Greeks valued courage, fame, strength and this went on until the Roman Empire. However, the Roman Empire collapsed, perhaps, one could say, because of its excesses. It was eventually replaced by Christendom, which is the very antithesis of Roman ideals, as it values humility, world-denial, turning the other cheek and so forth. This gave rise in the middle ages, to a period of relative stagnation. Eventually the conflict of these two ideas (the search for power and glory vs. humility and world-denial) become resolved in a higher-level synthesis of the two, a combination of both values which can be seen, for instance, in Renaissance art.) Eventually this idea breaks down again, give rise to its antithesis, and the conflict will be resolved in a synthesis and so on. Hegel believed that this process would continue until the highest synthesis, which is ultimate truth, or God, is reached. In other words, history and the evolution of ideas is seen as God (ultimate truth) becoming Himself.

Because, of course, we can understand these ideas which are manifested in the world, we can also understand the ultimate truth of God to which they are leading.]

To be a true Christian, for Kierkegaard, is not about merely subscribing to a list of dogmatic beliefs, that is, it is not a matter of accepting the objective truth of God as the creator of the world, say, or of Christ as His incarnation. Instead, a truly religious attitude involves a subjective and emotional relationship with God and with Christ, even though one can never fully know or understand them. It
is subjective because it needs to be experienced for oneself; that is we need to have a personal rapport with God which affects us inwardly. Kierkegaard in fact did not believe that priests or the Church could act as intermediaries between a believer and God; rather, there has to be a direct connection between oneself and God. This is an emotional relationship because although God cannot be understood or known through reason, yet one believes in Him with fervent faith, and cultivates love, devotion and other emotions towards Him. These emotions need to be constantly renewed. (This means that one cannot become a true Christian, once and for all, simply by being baptized).

**Sartre (1905 - 1980) and Radical Freedom**

[Recall that the last chapter ended with the claim that even if we could discover what human nature is, this will not enable us to determine what the good life is, since humans, unlike other species are radically free, and can opt to go against nature.]

Existentialism is often summed up with Sartre’s phrase “existence before essence.” What this means is that our subjective experience of the world and of ourselves (existence) is more important than any objective definition of what it means to be human (essence). In fact existentialists do not believe there is such a thing as what it (objectively) is to be a human, that is, unlike Aristotle, they do not believe there is a human nature or human essence. Sartre claims that “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.

The traditional definition of ‘essence’ is “that which a thing cannot lose without becoming something else.”

[Is there anything which, if a human lost, he or she would no longer be that person? Clearly I could lose any number of limbs or parts of my body and still remain me. I could go through a complete character change, and yet I’d remain the same person. The only thing which I cannot lose in order to remain myself is my life. Hence, ‘existence before essence.’]

Compare this to the difference we saw between Aristotelian biology and evolutionary theory. According to Aristotle, species came into existence with their natures predetermined and fixed, and therefore, he defines them as having a fixed essence - ‘humans are rational animals.’ This implies that humans must have walked upright, been able to talk and reason and so on from the very beginning of their existence. This is the same view adopted by Christianity. Traditionally Christianity holds that God created all the animals and humans and that therefore, when they first appeared, they were already in their current form. Thus according to Christianity too, humans have a fixed nature, which will never change.

Evolution on the other hand suggests that there is no such thing as the nature of humans, that the species ‘homo sapiens’ is something fluid and changeable, and dependent upon environmental conditions. Existentialists seem to agree with evolutionists against Aristotle, at least with respect to the human species. What they are saying is that there is no fixed nature of human beings as Aristotle believed.]

Sartre thinks that even if God did create human beings, we would still have the radical freedom to decide whether to adopt His plan for us or not. (This is similar to Graham’s point in chapter 4, that
even if we could say what our nature is, we could decide to go against it.) Even if God spoke to us directly, (as in the story of Abraham) we would have to decide for ourselves, whether we really believe this is God speaking, and whether to follow His instructions. If God said to me “Sacrifice your only child to me, because it is good to do so,” only I can decide whether it is really good to do such a thing, and whether or not to do it.

Similarly, whatever rational or objective reasons we give in answer to the question “what is the good life” such arguments, according to existentialism, will not necessarily make us accept the answer. Like Kierkegaard, existentialists believe that such ‘truths’ need to be accepted subjectively, i.e. they must be made true for oneself. So for instance, even if hedonists could prove through rational argument that pleasure is the only good there is, I would still be free to reject this subjectively, and claim that there is some other good besides pleasure. The same is true for any other objective view in ethics. This is what makes us radically free; we are free to decide whether or not to adopt any particular view as our own chosen belief in what is a good life. We are free to decide whether or not to live by such a philosophy, i.e. whether to make it true for us.

[C.S. Doesn’t this make the study of ethics completely useless? What’s the point of studying the arguments in favour of and against competing views of the good life, if, in the end, we can just accept or reject any old view, irrespective of rational argument?] Another famous remark of Sartre’s is that “there is no difference between the being of a man and his being free.” To understand this we need to think of two ways in which objects can exist in the world.

1. Being-in-itself is the way that everything which is not human exists. Stones, trees, and animals “are just there and have no awareness of or value for themselves” (p. 78) In other words, because they have no self-consciousness, they cannot value their life (or existence) and they cannot consciously try to direct it towards the good.

2. Being-for-themselves (i.e. humans) are aware of their own existence; they are aware of the flow of time and can act so as to shape their future according to the direction they want their lives to take. Their future is entirely open, because humans, having no essential nature, do not need to develop in any preordained way. This is why Being-for-itself is “a sort of nothingness” or perhaps a sort of openness.

[C.S. Recall Aristotle’s concept of telos. The acorn must develop into an oak, and given a set of conditions, it will develop into a particular type of oak. If it doesn’t have enough water, it will grow into a stunted tree. It cannot overcome these conditions; it cannot think “Well, I had a bad start in life, because I didn’t get enough water, but now I’ve had therapy and so I’ve learnt not to let these things affect me anymore.” A lack of water will necessarily lead to a stunted tree. Humans on the other hand can overcome their conditioning; if I was raised to be pessimistic, for example, I can still decide for myself whether to accept this trait, and with some effort, I can learn to overcome it.]

Of course, our freedom is limited because humans are actually both Being-in-Itself (our bodies have material existence, and try as we might, we cannot decide to become a flower, say) as well as Being-for-itself.
The difference between Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself is closely related to the distinction between being an object and being a subject. Although we could think of our bodies as objects we cannot think of ourselves as merely objects. We will always have some point of view from which we value our lives and perceived certain things as good and others bad for us. In other words our lives will always matter to us. This is what it means to be Being-for-itself.

[C.S. If you try to think of yourself as merely an object, as a lifeless body say, you will eventually get bored and think, I want something interesting to do. Or else, you’ll get hungry and want something to eat. Boredom, hunger, and so forth are experienced as bad, and we try to avoid things which we find bad. On the other hand there are things which we value, and which we seek to possess or enjoy. This is what it means to be a subject or Being-for-itself. It is to have a point of view from which certain things matter to us.]

For Sartre there is a negative aspect to this subjectivity or Being-for-itself and this is the anguish of radical freedom.

**Anguish and Bad Faith**

Graham states that “the good life is not easy to achieve” (p. 79). This is because, even though only I can choose which way of life is the right one, this does not mean I can just choose the easiest option. Existentialists believe we should try to live an authentic life, which means that however I choose to live, I must have a full understanding and acceptance of the freedom of this choice, and of the responsibility that this brings. It is no good hiding behind conventions, or other people’s choices; according to existentialists like Sartre, to be authentic, I have to make every choice for myself.

An important concept in Sartre’s philosophy is that of anguish. Anguish is the feeling that arises when I understand that I am in fact free to make my own decisions and to determine my own values.

Graham says that anguish arises from two sources:

1. Anguish arises as a response to the realization that I am nothing (no-thing) and that nothing can explain what I am.

[C.S. If we consider someone who defines herself as a mother, for example, she will do various things because she sees herself as fully determined by this role. If you ask her “why do you cook every day, why do you worry about your children’s H.W.” and so on, she might reply “because I’m a mother, and that is what mothers do.” This would be living in bad faith, because the woman has not made the choices her own; she sees herself as having a defined nature, and her actions are based on this. She believes that because she is a mother, she must necessarily do all the things she does.

When children grow up and leave the nest, this often leads to anguish for mothers, because they can no longer see themselves the way they did before. Although they are still mothers in some sense, they begin to feel empty and no longer know who they are, or what their role is. This is the feeling of being no-thing. You begin to realize that the way you have defined yourself is not necessarily correct, and that there are infinite possibilities for you. There is no necessary course for your life to take, but rather you have the total freedom to decide who and what you are going to be.

According to Sartre, we should feel anguish at all stages of our lives, because no matter what has happened in our past, this does not define who we are. We are always no-thing. Even though the
woman gave birth, she ought not to have automatically started thinking of herself as a mother (there are other options, e.g. giving the child up for adoption). Instead, she should accept her freedom to choose, her nothingness, and if she decides to raise the child, she should do so because she chooses to, that is, because in her own view, being a mother is a good way to live.

If we do accept our freedom, making a choice becomes very difficult. We cannot rely on any fixed idea of who or what we are and we cannot simply adopt other people’s ideas or our society’s conventions. It seems as though there is nothing upon which to base the decision. The realization that we are no-thing can make us feel groundless, a feeling which Sartre describes as the absurd.

[C.S. In a famous passage, Sartre describes the absurdity of existence, and the feeling of groundlessness that this gives rise to.

So I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn’t remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things...

Here Sartre is suggesting that just because we call something a ‘root’ this does not make it a root. What the root is, its existence, is something more than that.

Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of "existence." I was like the others, like the ones walking along the seashore, all dressed in their spring finery. I said, like them, "The ocean is green; that white speck up there is a seagull," but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an "existing seagull"; usually existence hides itself. It is there, around us, in us, it is us, you can't say two words without mentioning it, but you can never touch it... And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness... All these objects... how can I explain? They inconvenienced me; I would have liked them to exist less strongly, more dryly, in a more abstract way, with more reserve... Superfluous, the chestnut tree there, opposite me, a little to the left. Superfluous, the Velleda... And I—soft, weak, obscene, digesting, juggling with dismal thoughts—I, too, was superfluous.

Sartre suggests that when you fully experience the existence of things, when you realize the brute fact that things just are without being anything in particular, or being that way for any particular reason, this is not a pleasant feeling at all. Rather, it makes one feel that everything, including oneself, is superfluous, that it exists for no reason and that it may as well never have existed at all. In other words, its existence is not necessary (superfluous). Further on, he explains why it is absurd...

This root—there was nothing in relation to which it was absurd. Oh, how can I put it in words? Absurd: in relation to the stones, the tufts of yellow grass, the dry mud, the tree, the sky, the green benches. Absurd, irreducible; nothing—not even a profound, secret upheaval of nature—could explain it. Evidently I did not know everything, I had not seen the seeds sprout, or the tree grow. But faced with this great wrinkled paw, neither ignorance nor knowledge was important: the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence. A circle is not absurd, it is clearly explained by the rotation of a straight segment around one of its extremities. But neither does a circle exist. This root, on the other hand, existed in such a way that I could not explain it. Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me, filled my eyes, brought me back unceasingly to its own existence. In vain to repeat:
"This is a root"—it didn't work any more. I saw clearly that you could not pass from its function as a root, as a breathing pump, to that, to this hard and compact skin of a sea lion, to this oily, callous, headstrong look. The function explained nothing: it allowed you to understand generally that it was a root, but not that one at all. (Sartre, Jean-Paul.1938. Nausea, Penguin Books, 182-6)

In other words, even though we understand the function of a root, how it got there, and so forth there is still something we cannot capture, its existence, or perhaps, its ‘thatness’ - its being that very root, here and now. Reason cannot explain existence and it is this fact which leads Sartre to describe it as absurd.

2. Anguish also arises because, due to my radical freedom, I have to create my own values and this brings enormous responsibility with it. This is because in creating my values, I create them for everyone else.

[C.S. to return to the example of the mother - if she acknowledges her freedom then she cannot simply rely on convention or what others expect of her. Suppose she worked for UNICEF, and her job involved bringing food and education to millions of poor children around the world, and has to decide whether to go on working or raise her own child. She must create her values, that is, whether she decides to raise her child, or go on working, she must realize that only her own decision makes it the right thing to do. There is nothing outside of herself that she can appeal to, and therefore the responsibility for the choice is entirely her own.

However, once she has decided, she has somehow set a standard for everyone else. If she decides to raise her child it is as though she were saying that all women ought to raise their children, and this is where the responsibility lies.]

Most people are unable to face up to the radical freedom and responsibility that human existence entails, and thus live most of their lives trying to escape it. There are three ways in which this is done.

1. By thinking we can simply not make any decision at all. However, even if it appears that we have not made any decision, failing to decide is also a decision which leads to particular consequences.

[C.S. Supposing we are dissatisfied with our lives, however we do not do anything to change it. That in itself amounts to a choice to leave things as they are.]

2. By making our choices in accordance with some external source of value - e.g. God, but also say hedonism (i.e. pleasure), human rights or any other ‘objective’ value that might exist. Most of the philosophers we have covered in previous chapters take this option as they locate value in something outside themselves (pleasure, the Good, human nature etc.) This is the way of the “serious-minded.”

3. By living in bad faith. Bad faith involves seeing yourself as having a fixed nature, or having some social role, and living your life in accordance with this. We somehow objectify ourselves (“I am a mother”, “I am shy”) and everything we do is determined by this fixed idea we have of ourselves. On p. 82 Graham cites a passage where Sartre describes a waiter
whose every movement and gesture is determined by the fact that he sees himself as a waiter and no more.

[C.S. In general, to do something “in good faith” means that we do it without deception. For example, “I sold you that car in good faith” means I didn’t know that it was stolen, or that there were problems with the engine. To do something in bad faith, then, suggests the opposite; a lack of honesty, or a lack of integrity.]

Living in bad faith involves self-deception, because if we were honest with ourselves, we would know that our roles and past experiences do not fully determine what we could be. However, we refuse to think about this, because if we did, we would then need to face up to our freedom and responsibility and this would cause us to feel anguish.

Living in bad faith is inauthentic. For existentialists, the good life is one that is lived authentically, i.e. in good faith. This involves “the pursuit of consciously self-chosen values and purposes for which the chooser takes full responsibility.” (p 83)

Graham now raises four questions with regards to existentialism:

- Is human existence absurd in such a way that gives reason for anguish?
- Is it better to act in good faith?
- Is it true that humans are the creators of value and in what sense?
- Are we really so radically free?

His answers to these reveal the objections he has to existentialism.

**The Absurdity of Existence**

Graham relates the discussion so far to the dispute between rationalists and empiricists. The rationalists believed there has to be a reason for everything. By ‘reason’, however, they do not simply mean ‘a cause,’ but a necessary reason. In other words, according to rationalists things are the way they must be, they could not have been otherwise. Empiricists on the other hand look for contingent reasons, in the sense of causes.

[C.S. Compare two ‘reasons’ for the existence of humans. A rationalist might say that without humans, God’s world would be less perfect, and therefore we had to exist. Our existence is necessary according to such a view. This is a rationalistic explanation in that it is obtained through logical argument alone, and will be necessarily true, if true at all.

An empiricist would say that humans are here simply because at some point in history apes came out of the trees and into the open savannah. They could easily have never done so in which case, the human species would not have evolved. Our existence, that is, is contingent- it could have been otherwise. The explanation is empiricist because it appeals to facts rather than logical arguments alone.]

The existentialist believes that existence is absurd because existence is contingent, and has no rationalistic explanation. This is a regrettable fact for existentialists; we would like there to be some sort of rationalistic explanation for our existence, in fact we need one in order to determine how to
live without the anguish that we normally experience. However, we can never find a necessary reason for why we are here, and neither can we find a necessary answer to the question ‘how should I live.’

Graham suggests that this attitude is a mistake. Why should we expect to find some necessary reason for our existence? Why should we fall into anguish just because we do not? He criticizes existentialists for not fully throwing off rationalistic assumptions, even though they claim to reject rationalism. This is why, he claims, existentialists are often dismissed as ‘disappointed rationalists.’

[C.S. How important is this criticism? Just because existentialists are ‘disappointed’ with the outcome of their philosophy, does this make it any less valid?]

**Acting in Good Faith**

Graham summarizes the existentialist view of the good life as “what you choose to do...is not as important as the way you choose it. Whatever the choice, it is at least valuable in so far as it is made in good faith.” (p. 85)

This means, he goes on to say, that any choice we make could be made in good faith. One might choose to be a criminal or to be a law-abiding person; as long as this choice is made with recognition of freedom and responsibility, there is nothing to say one is worse than the other. In fact, supposing you choose, in good faith, to be a criminal, that is, you decide to break the law because you recognize the freedom you enjoy etc. On the other hand, I continue to respect the law, because I believe I have to, or because I do not recognize my own freedom. According to existentialism, your choice is a better one, and you are living a better and more authentic life!

Here Graham brings in the example of the sincere Nazis; those who truly believed in Hitler’s vision and adopted it willingly. Is it true that, because they made this choice in good faith, their lives were better than those who became Nazis in bad faith; i.e. those who lied to themselves about what was really going on in concentration camps, or who told themselves they had no choice? Intuitively we would think the sincere Nazis were worse than those who were ‘simply following orders.’ However, existentialism implies the opposite - because they lived authentically the sincere Nazis lived better lives.

**The Creation of Value**

Recall the different meta-ethical views we discussed in chapter one - subjectivism and relativism vs. various forms of objectivism. Existentialists reject both objectivism and relativism, because both place the source of values outside the individual subject. Objectivism is the view that values exist objectively in the world while relativism is the view that values are determined by social customs and conventions. In other words, neither gives much importance, as existentialists do, to the individual’s process of valuing.

Existentialists believe that each one of us creates our own values when we choose a particular course of action. It is not a matter of choosing between values which already exist, rather, when we decide what to do, we create a new value from scratch.
Graham questions whether this is possible - can we really create entirely new values? Aren’t our decisions based on values that we share with other or at least recognize that others share?

[C.S. To go back to our working mother - whether she decides to raise the child (i.e. she values motherhood) or stay at work (i.e. she values the work she does) she does not literally create these values. They were there before and this is why, even if we do not agree with her decision, we could understand why she chose to do what she did.]

The example of Dr. Johnson is meant to show that if someone did try to create a new value (Johnson valued dancing about in the middle of the street in a ridiculous manner) we would not be able to make sense of it, except through values which we already have (e.g. he wants to make people happy). In other words, Graham is suggesting that even if this dance was valuable to him, it does not make it actually valuable. Similarly, even if I could create new values as the existentialists suggest, this would not actually make such things valuable.

**Radical Freedom**

Graham also questions (as many of us do) the theory that we are radically free. It seems there are limits to what we can actually do, constraints placed on us by society, our jobs, roles and so forth. Are existentialists right in thinking that we always have free choice?

We have to distinguish between logical impossibilities - e.g. I cannot buy what is not for sale - and legal impossibilities, or legal freedom - e.g. I cannot buy a gun without a license. Legal impossibility seems to be less strong than logical impossibility; I can break my country’s laws, but not the laws of logic. However, the fact the laws differ in countries shows that it is possible to be freer in one place than in another. Therefore, according to Graham, the doctrine that we are all radically free is just not true.

[C.S. For example, try telling a person who lives under a dictatorship, or a woman who lives under Sharia law that they are radically free. Perhaps there is a sense in which they too can determine their own futures, however, this is much easier for those of us who live in liberal democracies. Can we all be ‘radically free’ when some of us are so much freer than others?]

There are various ways in which our actions are constrained - Graham lists the following:

1. Logical constraints: e.g. I cannot make a round-square table.
2. Physical constraints: e.g. I cannot fly by flapping my arms.
3. Legal constraints: e.g. I cannot buy cocaine because it is illegal
4. Financial constraints: e.g. I cannot buy cocaine because I haven’t got the money
5. Prudential constraints: e.g. I cannot buy cocaine because it is bad for my health
6. Moral constraints: e.g. I cannot buy cocaine because if I did I would be supporting crime in Latin America which is wrong.

According to existentialists, only the first two set true limits on our freedom; in fact, if we consider the examples, only the first two describe things which are absolutely impossible for me to do.

However Graham objects that logical and physical constraints are irrelevant when it comes to moral deliberation. When wondering about the right thing to do, or the good life, we are more likely to
take into consideration legal, financial, prudential and moral reasons and such constraints are less binding than logical and physical ones. Therefore, so far it seems existentialists are right in saying we are free.

However, Graham now brings in rational freedom. We do not want to adopt just any set of values but we want to find good reasons for accepting values. This means that there are some values that we cannot adopt, simply because there are no good reasons for them. Thus this is another form of constraint:

7. Rational constraints: I cannot decide to value something if there are no good reasons for doing so.

If this is a limit on our freedom, according to Graham, then it is a good thing we are not radically free.
Chapter 6 - Kantianism

Virtue and Happiness: faring well and doing right

So far Graham has talked about ‘the good life’ in general, but now he distinguishes between two senses in which this phrase can be used:

1. The good life in the sense of one where I am happy, flourishing, where I have what I want, or what is in my interests etc. (Aristotle’s, egoists’, hedonists’ use.) In this sense, I can be a bad person, and still have a good life in that I am rich, healthy and so on.

2. The good life in a moral sense; i.e. a virtuous (in the modern sense not Aristotle’s) or worthy life. I can be poor and sick (and therefore not leading a good life in Aristotle’s sense) and yet because I act morally, one can say I lead a good life.

Graham points out that this is a modern distinction - for Aristotle and many of the early Greeks there was no difference between these two senses of ‘a good life.’

However, Plato and Socrates were well aware of the distinction and argued that it is better to take care of one’s soul, i.e. to lead a good life, than to have a good life in the sense of physical and material well-being.

The modern distinction perhaps derives from Christianity. We can see it at work in such sayings as; “blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” and “To gain the world and lose your soul....”

Graham’s project now is to show that the happy life is not the same as the morally good life and that the morally good life is much more important. However, he will also argue that the morally good life cannot be separated altogether from the happy life.

[C.S. in fact, many of the objections that Graham has made to the views we have considered so far, rest upon this distinction. For example, with regards to egoism, where the good life is one where I get what I want (‘good life’ in sense 1), he objected that I could want something morally bad (‘good life’ sense 2). Similarly, hedonism is subject to the critique that pleasure (sense 1) can be taken in the suffering of others (sense 2).]

Kant and the ‘Good Will’

Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804) made a similar distinction between having a good life and leading a good life. He did this by showing that all those things which make up “a good life” in sense 1 above are only good with qualification.

- ‘Good with qualification’ means that something is good only within certain conditions. For example, aspirin is good with qualification; if you take it when you have a headache then it can have a good effect. But this doesn’t mean that it is good to take aspirin all the time. Similarly, the things which make up a good life in sense 1 - money, fame, social standing and so on - are not always good. Whether or not it is good to have money, fame and so on depends on circumstances as they can be used in bad ways.
‘Good without qualification’ means that something is always good, irrespective of circumstances, and cannot lose this goodness.

Is there anything that is good without qualification? For Kant the only thing which is always good and cannot lose this goodness is the good will, or good intention. Everything else can be used in a bad way and this depends on one’s intentions. For example, if I have money, it is my will which determines the way I will use it, and whether I will use it in a good or bad way. Even though I might decide to use it in a good way - supposing I want to give money to charity - I might find that the money ends up in some dictator’s bank account instead. This is why money is only good with qualification. On the other hand, my intention or will, the fact that I wanted to give money to charity, will always be good and nothing can change that - not even the bad and unintended results of my action.

[C.S. Here are a couple of examples. Suppose I want to pay a compliment to my friend and so I ask “have you lost weight?” She takes it the wrong way and becomes upset, thinking that I mean she is too fat. My intention, or will, was to make her happy, and that remains good, even though as a result of what I said she became unhappy.

Again, suppose this time that I said the very same words sarcastically, wanting to imply that she is fat. However, my friend thinks I am sincere and is pleased. Even though the end result is good, because my motivation was to hurt her, my intention or will remains evil.]

Kant, therefore, rejects the idea that it is the consequences of actions that makes them morally good or bad. Rather, “intention and outcome need to be separated.” (As we shall see, this is the very opposite of what utilitarians believe.)

Another important distinction for Kant is that between good will and good inclination. For an action to be morally worthy, we must have a conscious intention to do what is right. If we do something because we happen to like doing it, because we enjoy it or it makes us happy, because we were brought up that way, or because we happen to be the sort of person who does such things, for Kant this is not a moral action. That is, inclination is irrelevant when it comes to morality.

[C.S. For instance, if I’m the sort of person who always says nice things to people because I want to keep the peace and I don’t want to cause trouble, or because I’m in the habit of saying nice things, or because I enjoy it, or it makes me happy, this is not moral action for Kant. Even if I’m just a really nice person who wants everyone to feel good all the time, this does not make my actions moral.]

Why did Kant believe this? It is because “inclinations cannot be commanded.” That is, I cannot change the sort of person I am, if I have an inclination to be mean, unkind or whatever, I cannot be blamed for this. However, I can be blamed if I continue to act on these inclinations, even though I know that such behaviour is wrong. Through having a good will, I can overcome my inclination to be mean and give money to charity, because I know that this is the right thing to do. This is what makes an action morally worthy for Kant. A moral action for Kant is one performed out of knowledge that such an action is the right thing to do, knowing that one has a duty to perform such actions.

[C.S Compare this with virtue ethics, where the focus is not on actions but on the virtues. Virtue ethicists suggest that to become a moral person is to make oneself a virtuous person in the sense...]}
that virtuous act becomes automatic. Thus it seems that for virtue ethicists, inclination is essential.]

The question is, how do I know what is right, and given that I know what the right thing to do is, how do I direct my will so that it will fall in line with this knowledge? For Kant, we can arrive at knowledge of what is right through reason, and I can direct my will through reason too. In short, the good will is a purely rational will.

David Hume and Practical Reason

Theoretical and Practical Reason:

To understand why the good will is purely rational we have to distinguish between theoretical and practical reason.

1. **Theoretical reason**: Tells you what to think/ believe. The conclusion is an “is” statement e.g. “2+2 = 4,” “smoking is bad for your health.” It does not refer to any values or desires.

2. **Practical reason**: Tells you what to do. The conclusion is an “ought” statement, e.g. “you ought to study maths,” “you shouldn’t smoke” or an imperative e.g. “study maths”, “don’t smoke.” Often, one of the premises must refer to a value or desire (... “if you want to pass you exam,” “... if you want to live a long life”). It can also depend on circumstances (“maths is an important subject,” “smoking happens to be bad for the health.”) For this reason, practical reason is also sometimes called hypothetical reason, because it assumes that there are shared values and a specific set of circumstances (“if smoking is bad for you and you want to be healthy then you should give up smoking.”) However, Kant disagrees that all practical reason is hypothetical (as we shall see below).

The problem with practical reason, as we have described it here, is that it depends on our having shared values or desires. For you to convince me that I should not smoke, I need to have the same values and desire for good health and so on. But what if I did not?

According to David Hume (1711-1776) there is no way to rationally decide between one desire and another. Recall that Hume, as a subjectivist, believes that values, desires and preferences are a matter of individual taste. Just like I cannot, through reason, persuade you that heavy metal is better than hip hop, I cannot, through reason, persuade you that you ought to want x rather than y. Some of the examples he gives are the following:

1. Most people would choose a small discomfort for themselves, such as, having a scratch on their finger, rather than a major tragedy for everyone, e.g. the destruction of the whole world. However, if I happened to prefer the second option, there is way you can convince me, through reason, that I am wrong.

2. Again, most people put their own interests before those of strangers; however, if I prefer to be completely ruined myself, rather than have a total stranger suffer the slightest discomfort, you cannot through reason persuade me to change my preference.

3. The third example is one we often encounter. How many people prefer a lesser good (immediate pleasure from smoking, say) rather than a greater good (a long, healthy life)?
They might even know that the latter is better for them, yet you cannot convince them through reason to not want to smoke.

In short, according to Hume, if someone’s preferences do not coincide with ours, we can say they are weird or abnormal but we cannot say they are being irrational.

Hypothetical and Categorical Imperatives

Kant’s (indirect) reply to Hume

Kant distinguishes between two types of practical reason, based on two types of conclusions, i.e. imperatives, which it can arrive at:

1. There are those that, as we have seen, are hypothetical and depend on some shared values or desire.
2. Others are categorical and rest on no particular desire. For example “keep your promises!” is an imperative we should always following, regardless of our desires or circumstances.

According to Kant, categorical imperatives lie at the heart of morality and “transcend our wants or desires by presenting us with rational principles of action in the light of which those desires themselves are to be assessed.” That is to say, categorical imperatives override our desires; they come first and we should judge whether our desires are good ones or not and therefore direct our will, according to these imperatives.

Are there such things as categorical imperatives? Kant thought that there are, and we should be able to discover them through pure practical reason - i.e. not the hypothetical type, not the type that rests on desires and circumstances or facts.

To anticipate these are Kant’s Categorical Imperatives:

“I should never act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should be a universal law” - also known as the universalizability test.

“Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always as an end, and never as a means only” - called the principle of respect for persons (p. 115).

Universalizability

Kant explains the first imperative, the universalizability law or test, by asking us to imagine a world of perfectly rational beings (Graham calls them ‘angels’ for short, but we could also imagine a set of computers which were programmed to perfectly imitate human rationality). The test consists in asking whether it would be possible for all of these creatures to agree with and act upon a particular maxim.

- Maxim: an imperative together with a reason, i.e. hypothetical imperative. For example:
  1. “If you want to save money, download music instead of paying for it.” [My example, not Graham’s and definitely not Kant’s!]
  2. “Treat others well so that you are treated well in turn”
Why did Kant bring in these ‘perfectly rational beings?’ Of course humans are rational beings too, however there are other factors which sometimes motivate our actions; most importantly, emotions, bodily drives, culture etc. As a test for determining the rightness or wrongness of a particular action, Kant suggests we ask whether a purely rational being, i.e. one who is not influenced by things like anger, greed or hunger or tradition, would do such a thing. Graham explains this by saying that what is an objective law for such perfectly rational beings, is also subjectively necessary for them, that is, there is no difference for them between what they know they ought to do and what they want (or are inclined) to do.

The important issue is that in a world with such beings, we would be able to predict their behaviour with accuracy - we know the situation, we know what the rational thing to do is, and therefore we can predict what this ‘angel’ (or computer) would do. Human behaviour on the other hand is unpredictable because so many other factors come into it besides rationality.

So here is how Kant proposed that we determine what the moral law is. For any action we are about to perform, we state it in the form of a maxim and ask whether this maxim could be a universal law in a world of perfectly rational beings. In other words, would it be ‘natural’ or even possible for all such beings to always act this way?

Clearly, example 2 could be a universal law, whereas 1 could not be a universal law in such a world. When we see that a maxim cannot be applied universally in a world of perfectly rational beings, then we understand it is not part of the moral law (in other words, it could be morally wrong). Here are some of Kant’s own examples (in Graham p 112-113):

1. Proposed maxim 1: “whenever the future promises more bad than good kill yourself.” This could not be a law in a perfectly rational world, because it would prevent such beings from working to improve their future.
2. Proposed maxim 2: “When broke, borrow money even though you know you will never be able to pay it back.” Again, if everyone did this, nobody would lend money and it would be impossible to borrow.

Graham’s objections: We could argue against 1 by saying that the maxim only applies to those whose future seems very bleak; that rational beings with normal lives could go on experiencing ups and downs, without making it rational for them to kill themselves. Thus they could go on working to improve things; while those in very bad situations might act rationally by committing suicide. 2 is similar; it assumes that everybody will at some point find themselves in dire circumstances and consequently make a lying promise to pay back the borrowed money. The reality is that most will be able to pay back the money and keep their promise.

[C.S. to me it seems that Graham misses the point here. The universalizability test involves asking whether a particular maxim - which is an imperative and a reason - can be followed by everyone. That is, everyone will have the same reason for acting that way.]

The simplified version of the universalizability test is to ask “What if everyone did that?” If you find that you cannot accept that everyone does the same, then the action cannot be morally acceptable.

Why would we not accept that everyone does the same? There are two reasons:
1. The consequences would be undesirable (e.g. 1 - we don’t want a world where everyone kills themselves; we want a world where people work to improve the situation).
2. It would be impossible (e.g. 2 - if nobody is lending money then it is impossible to borrow).

If the answer to “what if everyone did that” were either of these (but especially 2), then we can see that the action is not morally worthy. In this way, Kant arrived at the basic imperative from which all other moral laws can be derived, to repeat:

“I should never act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should be a universal law.”

Summary of Kant’s Philosophy

Pages 115-116 contain a useful summary of Kant’s Ethics.

Graham raises three objections to Kant, which he deals with in the next three sections. In brief these are:

1. Intention and outcome cannot be separated completely; the rightness or wrongness of an action depends, in part at least, on its effects.
2. The universalizability test does not allow us to determine right from wrong.
3. Doing one’s ‘duty for duty’s sake’ paints a rather unattractive picture of the good life.

Act Intention and Outcome

Objection 1: Graham argues that a good intention is not enough for morality. First of all, we actually have to act upon our intentions, and secondly, there has to be the right sort of effect.

[C.S. Suppose I intended to murder someone, and then, something happens to prevent me from accomplishing this, say, my gun was not loaded, or I missed. Is this as bad as having actually murdered the person? Even law makes a distinction between murder and attempted murder. The intention matters, but so does the outcome.]

Reply: Some people claim that what counts morally is “not what we do, but what we try to do.” This can be seen in expressions such as “at least you tried,” “it’s the thought that counts.”

Rejoiner: Still, trying, or intending to do something must have some sort of consequences. Therefore, consequences do matter.

[C.S. If I sit around intending to do my work without actually acting upon this intention, can this be said to be a moral action?]

No, I have to do something about my intention - the first step would be to switch on my computer. That is, there must be some sort of action. If I then spend the rest of the evening on Facebook, I cannot really say I tried to work. I have to at least open a word document and start typing, or whatever. That is, the action must have the right sort of effect.]

Thus Graham concludes that to determine whether our lives are moral or not we have to decide “not only whether what we meant to do was right or wrong, but also whether what we did was right
or wrong.” Anything we do is going to have some effect and therefore, we also have to consider the effects of what we did.

[C.S. This will be taken up again in the chapter on Utilitarianism]

In sum, will and intention are important, but so are actions and the results of these actions.

The Universalizability Test

Here Graham brings in an example of the consistent Nazi who holds the maxim “This person should be exterminated because he/she is a Jew.” A consistent Nazi could follow this maxim at all times and in all cases, even if her loved ones or even if she herself turns out to be a Jew.

Graham argues that it is logically possible for a world of perfectly rational beings to follow this law. But we all agree that killing people because they are Jews is morally wrong. Therefore, the universalizability test does not allow us to determine right from wrong.

Similarly, Kant’s maxim “you should give charity to the needy so that if you fall on hard times you will receive charity” is not as logically necessary as he thought. It is possible for everyone to subscribe to the belief that giving charity is always bad, even if they themselves were in need.

[C.S. Notice the emphasis is, like in Kant, on reason 2, i.e. the possibility, rather than desirability, of all rational beings following such a law. Whether such an outcome would be desirable is not discussed.]

Therefore, universalizability does not pick out that which we normally think is right or wrong. More importantly, it does not help us decide what to do. Both principles “Never kill people because they are Jewish” and “always kill people who are Jewish” can be held universally and consistently and therefore, the universalizability principle cannot help us to choose between them.

Duty for Duty’s Sake

As we saw, for Kant, an action is moral if we do it because we know it is our duty, and for no other reason. That is, we do it because we know it is the right thing to do, and not because we want to, or we enjoy it, or because it makes us happy etc. That is “the moral life is the life of duty for duty’s sake.”

There are two problems with this view:

1. It rules out many lives which we would normally say were good ones. Graham gives an example of someone who devotes her life to inventing a device that helps the physically handicapped. She enjoys this work, but has no sense that it is her duty - she does it because she wants to. Is that not a good life?

2. It makes the moral life sound very unattractive. Someone who devotes their life to duty could easily be very unhappy, especially if they don’t enjoy doing what they see as their duty.

Here Graham returns to the distinction between having and leading a good life or the happy vs. the moral life. As we saw, Kant separates them altogether; however Graham argues that this is a
mistake. This is because, on this account of morality, there is no reason why anyone would want to lead a good life in Kant’s sense. To show this, he sets up a thought experiment:

Imagine the world were such that doing your duty always led to negative consequences for yourself. In other words, the more you did the right thing, the unhappier you became. Therefore, we would always have to choose between being moral and being happy in such a world.

Kant believed we ought to choose to act morally, and that this is tantamount to acting rationally. But, Graham asks, why should be assume that rationality is more important than happiness?

[C.S. Many ‘moralists’ tend to assume that morality is more important than happiness. But if we equate morality with rationality, as Kant does, then it is easy to see that rationality may not be as important as happiness.]

Kant believed that ultimately moral duty and happiness would not come into conflict, because God would make sure of this. However, if we are trying to find a non-religious view of morality we cannot make this assumption. Therefore, we have to find an account of the good life which, as well as being a moral life, is also a happy one.

To summarize the main conclusions of this chapter:

1. We have to consider the rightness and wrongness of the results of our actions, as well as that of our intentions.
2. The moral life must somehow be related to the happy life.

This brings us nicely to the next chapter on utilitarianism, which, in brief, can be defined as the view that a morally right action is one which has a particular result (point 2). This is the greatest happiness (point 2) for the greatest number.
Chapter 7 - Utilitarianism

Utility and the Greatest Happiness Principle

As we saw, there are various objections to Kant’s idea of duty for duty’s sake, in particular, that it does not consider the effects of our actions, but focuses only on intention, and that it is unappealing, and does not explain why we would want to do our duty, when this does not make us happy. Perhaps Kantianism’s major rival, utilitarianism, which places emphasis on happiness as an effect of our actions, might be more successful.

Utilitarianism derives from ‘utility’, i.e. usefulness; however, in philosophy this has a specific meaning, limited to usefulness in creating happiness, well-being etc.

A utilitarian (in philosophical sense) believes in promoting pleasure and happiness. The best action for utilitarianism is the one which leads to the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number. This is known as the Greatest Happiness Principle.

Graham points out that utilitarianism is a widely accepted view; we often assume that whatever will bring about the greatest happiness is the best thing to do, and when certain rules or traditions do not lead to such happiness, we question those rules, not the greatest happiness principle (p133).

Jeremy Bentham (1748 - 1832)

Jeremy Bentham was the founder of utilitarianism, and defined many of its key terms:

Utility: ‘that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil or unhappiness.’ (p 131)

Principle of Utility: ‘that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.’

The principle of utility is similar to the Greatest Happiness Principle and can be extended to social institutions, and whole lives. In other words, the best institutions, the best lives, are those which increase happiness.

[C.S. Interestingly, Bentham wanted to include the happiness of other animals besides humans. He thought that the happiness of other animals was as important, morally speaking, as that of humans. The important question regarding animals, he wrote, was not whether they could reason or talk, but whether they suffer. Since they do, then their suffering is to be avoided. Bentham, 1823, Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, second edition, chapter 17, footnote.]

Bentham believed he could draw up a hedonic calculus i.e. a way of weighing different types of pleasures and pains so that we could calculate the effects of particular actions, and therefore calculate which would be better.

However, today this is widely rejected:
- How can we compare pleasures and pains? E.g. how can I compare the pleasure I get from torturing a kitten to the pain the kitten suffers?
- How can we compare incommensurable sorts of pleasures? For example, is eating 10 doughnuts equivalent to listening to music? (Recall the arguments we met against hedonism)
- How can we compare pleasures and pains over different people? Can I assume that I know what will make someone else happy? Can I assume I know how happy certain things will make other people?

John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1873)

J.S. Mill defined utilitarianism as the view that “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.” (132)

[C.S. Recall that we met Mill in the chapter on hedonism. Even in this paragraph, he seems to conflate happiness with pleasure. Bentham seems to think they are the same too. Therefore, we can ask, what is the difference between the views of hedonism and utilitarianism? Graham will answer this in the next section]

Egotism, Altruism and Generalized Benevolence

Utilitarians, unlike egoists or hedonists, give no special importance to their own happiness or pleasure. Utilitarianism is not selfish or egotistical.

Neither is utilitarianism altruistic in the sense that one puts other people’s happiness before one’s own.

Rather, it promotes ‘generalized benevolence’ - one’s happiness is important, but it is not more or less important than the happiness of others.

Recall that Graham objected to hedonism because people might indulge in ‘loathsome’ pleasures (e.g. sadistic ones, like torturing a kitten). This objection does not apply to utilitarianism because my pleasure does not count for more than the kitten’s (or kitten’s owner) and therefore I am not entitled to pursue my own pleasure at the expense of someone else’s.

Act and Rule Utilitarianism

There are several counterexamples that we could bring in to show that the principle of utility does not always conform to what we think of as right and wrong.

Graham’s example: if we all laughed at handicapped people this might increase the general level of happiness (assuming that the handicapped are a minority). However, we all agree that this is wrong.

Classic examples: killing a person whose life does not contain much happiness (and who does not contribute to general happiness) for his organs in order to transplant them into another person who...
leads a much more worthwhile life. Utilitarianism would approve of this and may even require it; however, we normally call it murder and claim it is wrong.

This is a problem which has long been recognized by utilitarians, and which led to the distinction between act and rule utilitarianism.

**Act Utilitarianism: (Bentham)** The focus is on actions - the best action is the one that leads to greatest happiness.

**Rule Utilitarianism: (Mill)** The focus is on rules which lead to greatest happiness - the best action is the one that follows such rules.

Rule utilitarianism seems to be more appealing since we cannot always know exactly what the consequences of our actions will be (as Graham will argue below); therefore, we need general rules to guide us.

Rule utilitarianism can reply to the above counterexamples: these actions are wrong because they go against those rules which generally lead to greatest happiness. Murder and making fun of less advantaged are wrong because, in general, they go against certain rules. If there were no such rules we would have more unhappiness, fear, pain, loss etc.

**Utilitarianism and Consequentialism**

Both types of utilitarianism (act and rule) have two important aspects:

1. There is a **focus on pleasure or happiness** (hedonic aspect) as the ultimate criterion of good or bad.
2. There is a **focus on consequences of rules or actions** (consequentialist aspect) as basis on which to judge rules or actions.

These aspects are distinct and separate and do not imply one another. The consequentialist aspect in fact can be found in other theories of ethics which are not utilitarian. For example, one might believe, like Oscar Wilde, that the best actions are those which lead to an increase in aesthetic value. Although the focus here is on consequences, there is no mention of happiness. Thus, while utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory, not all consequentialist theories are utilitarian.

Therefore, Graham will discuss both aspects separately, starting from consequences.

**Ascertaining Consequences**

Graham points out that it is difficult to know what all the consequences of an action will be. Although we can predict some of the effects of an action, these effects will have consequences of their own, which will, in turn, give rise to further consequences and so on ad infinitum. How can we possibly predict all of these?

There is also what Graham calls **negative consequences** - in brief by choosing to act in one particular way, I have chosen against an infinite number of other actions I might have taken. For example, when I choose to buy a bottle of wine, the wine-shop owner has benefitted, but the bookstore,
clothes shop, record store etc. have all lost out on potential sales. Again, how can I possibly know all the consequences of my action, especially when taking negative consequences into account?

In short, it is difficult to say what is meant by the consequences of an action, unless we simply mean the obvious first effects. But why should we limit our moral deliberation to these?

[C.S. Graham uses the metaphor of a stone thrown into water. The ripple it creates will exist for a short time, and then die out. The consequences of our actions are not like that, according to Graham. Instead, the waves will have further consequences (such as disturbing the fish!) which will give rise to further and further consequences (fishermen will have a poor catch, their families will go hungry, they won’t spend money, the economy will fail and so on, all because of a stone which was thrown into the water, to take a rather far-fetched example!)

A popular scientific theory that supports Graham’s point is known as Chaos Theory, and one of its main principles is called the ‘Butterfly Effect.’ In brief, this idea suggests that a very small change (such as a butterfly flapping its wings) can lead to huge, unpredictable consequences (such as a hurricane). The important point is that causes and effects are related in highly complex, non-linear systems, so that it is impossible to determine fully the effects of any particular event. Chaos Theory is accepted as mainstream science and underpins many disciplines (such as climatology, ecology etc.).]

To support his case, Graham gives the example of how a simple mistake made by the Austrian Archduke’s driver led to such terrible consequences as two world wars, the holocaust and the dropping of nuclear bombs in Japan (read p. 140 to see how this happened).

If we consider this mistake from a purely utilitarian perspective, focusing only on its consequences, then, Graham says, it “must have been the worst action in history.” In other words, by taking the wrong road and stopping the car briefly, the driver did something terrible.

However, there are three ways in which we can object to this:

First, if the driver hadn’t made that mistake, perhaps the Archduke would have been murdered on another occasion, and this would have given rise to all those consequences anyway.

Secondly, judging an action solely upon its consequences goes against the way we normally think of morality. To judge someone as responsible for the effects of his or her actions, they need to have intended for those consequences to come about. As Graham puts it “the chain of consequences may not be the same as the chain of responsibility” (p. 140).

Here we can see the merits of Kantian theory. Of course it makes no sense to blame two World Wars, the holocaust, nuclear weapons and so on, on that poor driver, and this is because he had no intention whatsoever to cause all these atrocities - he simply made a mistake!

Thirdly, why not ask about the causes of the driver’s mistake? Perhaps someone gave him the wrong advice, perhaps his superior chose the wrong person for the job, and the superior’s superior similarly could be held responsible and so on indefinitely.

Assessment and Prescription
So far, Graham has argued that the exclusive focus on consequences is misguided because, first, we cannot know what the all consequences of an action will be, and second, we cannot be held responsible for those which we did not intend to bring about.

As a reply to this objection, a utilitarian could distinguish between:

**Anticipated consequences**: These are the consequences that we can foresee, i.e. that we can predict before the event. Of course, the poor driver had no way of knowing that his mistake would have such disastrous effects, i.e. he could never have anticipated such consequences.

**Actual consequences**: These are the consequences which actually occur as a result of an action, many of which, as in the example, may not have been anticipated.

This leads to a further distinction in the way we evaluate actions:

We can assess an action after it has taken place, and question whether the actual consequences were good or not. The action might turn out to be the ‘wrong’ one in the sense that it did not have the results we wanted; however, here we are not making a moral judgment, because we understand that the agent (person doing the action) may not be responsible for all the consequences, as he or she could not have anticipated them.

To prescribe a certain action means to decide how one should act, what the right thing to do is, and clearly this happens before the action takes place. Here we can only take into account anticipated consequences (because we do not know what all the actual consequences will be), and based on these we determine whether an action is morally right or wrong.

A utilitarian could argue against the example of the driver’s mistake by claiming that it is not the actual consequences which make an action right or wrong. Utilitarianism is not a way of assessing actions after the event, but is rather a way of prescribing actions, based on anticipated consequences, which we determine through our general knowledge about cause and effect, and by following general rules. We try to work out what the consequences of an action will be, based on past experience, and on general rules which are also based on past experience.

How does this answer the objections raised? The driver could not have anticipated all the effects of his action (i.e. stopping the car to turn round); the only effects he could have anticipated were good ones (i.e. getting the Archduke to his destination). Therefore his action was the right one, morally speaking, even if it was the wrong one in terms of its actual effects.

On the other hand, the assassins could have anticipated some negative consequences of their actions (murder usually has negative effects, which is why there is a law against it) and therefore their actions were wrong both morally and in terms of actual effects.

But this leads to another problem. How far should one go in trying to anticipate the effects of an action?

[C.S. One might argue that the driver should have known that it was dangerous to stop the car and that knowing this, he should have checked the route beforehand to avoid making mistakes; in other words, that he should have anticipated the likely effects of his actions.]
Consequentialism and Spontaneity

If we spend too much time thinking about what the effects of our actions will be, it is likely we will never do anything, or we will miss the opportunity to do something good.

For example, rescue operations generally require that rescuers do not stop and think about the consequences, as the chances are they will fail to act, or take longer to act, and the effects will be more deaths.

This leads to the problem of spontaneity: is it true that if people try to anticipate the consequences of their actions, this will lead to good actions?

The problem seems to speak against utilitarianism - sometimes we increase happiness not when we stop to think about how to increase happiness, but when we act spontaneously, or instinctively.

To reply to this, we need to consider the distinction between Act and Rule Utilitarianism once again.

Act and Rule

The Rule Utilitarian could easily reply to this objection, because according to this view, we do not have to stop and calculate the effects of all our actions, but merely act upon those rules that in general increase happiness. Assuming there is a rule which says “in rescue operations, try to save as many lives as possible” we could follow this rule spontaneously and still be utilitarians.

However, Graham now asks whether there really is a distinction between act and rule utilitarianism.

He provides two examples of dilemmas where the choice is between killing innocent people and facing enormous negative consequences:

1. A sheriff can either execute a man he knows to be innocent (but whom the public believes is guilty of child murder) or have a revolt on his hands, which could lead to social unrest, fear, and a lynch mob.

2. An anti-terrorist must decide between blowing up the headquarters of a terrorist group, which contains innocent hostages, or allowing the terrorists to kill and injure hundreds of people.

According to act utilitarian, we simply weigh up the benefits and harms of each course of action, and do whatever will cause most benefit. This could mean that we choose to kill the innocent people.

As we saw, act utilitarianism is rejected because few would want to accept that such actions would be right.

Rule utilitarianism suggests that instead we should follow rules, one of which states that we should never intentionally kill innocent people. Mill, in fact, had written about the right of the innocent not to be punished.

To the question ‘why should we have such a rule against punishing the innocent?’ Mill’s reply is that in general this rule increases happiness. But, Graham objects, such counter-examples as 1 and 2 above show that this is not always true. A better rule would be “never punish the innocent unless..."
there is no other way to prevent major negative consequences.” And this shows, according to Graham, that there is no real difference between act and rule utilitarianism.

[C.S. Rule utilitarianism, as we saw, does not suggest that we simply follow those rules we already have, but those that lead to greatest happiness. Therefore, it accepts that some rules might need to be changed in certain circumstances. But this just means that, in every set of circumstances, we need to think about what (rule) will lead to the greatest happiness - which is exactly what act utilitarianism prescribes.]

Summary: Does the End Justify the Means?

The objections raised to utilitarianism can be summarized with the question - ‘does the end justify the means?’

According to utilitarians, the answer is yes; however, many of our examples shows that this is wrong, because

1. We do not always know what the consequences will be.
2. Sometimes, to bring about good consequences, we have to do things which we generally think of as wrong, unjust, etc.

As we have seen with other theories of ethics, the mere fact that utilitarianism sometimes goes against what we normally think of as right and wrong, is not in itself a conclusive argument against it.

Graham now turns to the second aspect of utilitarianism - the hedonic aspect - to see if there are objections to it.

The Nature of Happiness

What exactly is meant by happiness? Bentham and Mill identify it with pleasure, but Aristotle had already shown that this is a mistake.

Graham suggests we can use our ordinary understanding of happiness to assess utilitarianism. We all know when we are happy or unhappy; we know the difference between a happy and an unhappy marriage etc. Therefore, we can use this ordinary understanding to see if utilitarianism works.

Of course, people need different things to be happy - e.g. one woman is happy at home with her children, another would be miserable in such a situation. We can recognize these differences and still accept that it is good to increase general happiness.

In any case, there are some things which contribute to happiness for all people; e.g. sickness, bereavement, and insecurity always decrease happiness (p. 150).

[C.S. One might add that money, friends, success and so on generally increase happiness.]
In short, even though we do not have a precise definition of happiness and even though we know that different people have different ideas of what happiness is, we can follow some general guidelines to determine whether or not an action will make others happy.

**Measuring Happiness**

An important objection to utilitarianism follows from the fact that it requires us to be able to measure happiness. We have to be able to calculate whether a particular action will create more or less happiness than another.

Bentham’s hedonic calculus was one attempt at doing this; however, he did not think that pleasure or happiness can be quantified in exact numerical terms, or that any instrument to measure it could be invented.

Bentham’s idea was to compare different pleasures in order to see which was most important. We do this every day, for example, when making career choices, buying things for ourselves and others, deciding on a partner, we always ask “what would make me/ him/ her happier?”

Graham suggests we could also represent this numerically: Action A would make people very unhappy (-10), B would make them much less unhappy (+7), and C would make them happier still (+10).

Of course, since these numbers are not attributed in any scientific way, we cannot add them up or subtract them, using the usual rules of maths. However, this is enough to show that we can ‘measure’ happiness.

*C.S. Certain tests carried out by scientists also seem to measure happiness. For example, it has been scientifically shown that meditators are happier than non-meditators. The experiment involved measuring activity in the left prefrontal lobes of the brain, which, apparently, is linked to positive emotions. So perhaps happiness is scientifically measurable after all and we do have an instrument that allows us to make precise calculations? See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3047291.stm*

**Distributing Happiness**

So far, we have not found any important objections to the hedonic aspect of utilitarianism. However, Graham now raises the question of how happiness is to be distributed. The example he gives involves population and wealth. If we assume that having a higher population will lead to fewer resources to go round, and therefore less happiness for all, the problem can be stated in such terms:

Scenario 1: Suppose that the world could support a population of 20 billion people just getting by (subsistence means there is just about enough money to fill stomachs and so on, there is no comfort, no leisure time, no arts or culture, etc.). Individuals in this world are only a little happy (they are glad to be alive and that’s it perhaps).

Scenario 2: The same world could support a population of 2 billion living very comfortably, enjoying the finer things in life.

*C.S. Forget about whether this is realistic or not; remember, this is a thought-experiment.*
Suppose also that the total amount of happiness in scenario 1 was exactly equal to the total amount of happiness in scenario 2. According to utilitarianism, there is no reason to prefer one alternative over the other. However, we would usually tend to prefer a situation with a lower population living more comfortably.

[C.S. Graham’s example uses money rather than general happiness or comfort, but as I think this opens up the issue of whether happiness can be equated with money, I have changed it slightly here.

Another way of thinking about the issue is to consider family size. A couple have the option to have two children and send them to the best schools, buy them the best clothes, they can work less and spend more time with them etc. Suppose each child in this family had a happiness of +4. Total amount of happiness is therefore +8.

Otherwise, the couple could have eight children say, but now each parent has to work full-time, (and the father has a part-time job too), they cannot spend as much money or time on each child individually. These children are not so happy in their situation - they have to share rooms, clothes etc. Suppose they each had a happiness of +1.

The happiness of both sets of children add up to +8 and therefore utilitarianism gives us no reason to prefer one course of action over another. However, we would generally prefer to have fewer children who are happier.]

One way to save utilitarianism is to shift the focus from total happiness to average happiness - it is better to have a lower population where average happiness is greater, rather than a high population where total happiness is greater, but individual and average happiness is smaller.

However, once we shift to averages we have the problem that averages often hide huge differences. For example, in a country where the average salary is roughly $40,000, there could be 1000 people earning $4 million and 100,000 people earning $4 thousand. Similarly, an average happiness of +5 say could hide the fact that there are many people who have happiness of +1 and very few with happiness of +10. We could have a family where one child is treated as special and made very happy while the others are less happy. The average would be the same as it would be had all children been treated equally.

In short, utilitarianism cannot explain a principle that most people believe in - that happiness should be distributed equitably, and that inequality in this respect is unfair and unjust.

**Mill’s ‘Proof’ and Preference Utilitarianism**

Mill uses an Aristotelian argument to show that happiness is the ultimate value - in short, that happiness is the only thing desirable as an end (intrinsically) whereas everything else is desirable only as a means to that end (instrumentally).

Being an empiricist he believes that the only proof of the existence of something is that people can see, hear, touch it etc. Similarly, the only proof that happiness is desirable is that people desire it. People do in fact desire happiness, and therefore, happiness is a good.
Graham objects to this by arguing that people also desire other things intrinsically, besides happiness. Mill accepts this, but argues that anything else we do desire for its own sake (e.g. music) we desire because it makes up part of what happiness is for us.

Graham objects that this makes the distinction unclear - it seems Mill thinks we value things like music not intrinsically, but as a means to happiness. This is because if I could find something else which made me as happy as music does, say, watching films, I could give up the music and watch films instead. But this means I did not value the music for its own sake.

In fact, there are things, Graham shows, that we value intrinsically, and which have nothing to do with, and even conflict with happiness. Many of these are morally important, e.g. keeping promises, being truthful and so on. Often the effects of such actions are to decrease happiness, and yet we think that keeping a promise and saying the truth are things worth doing for their own sakes, despite the unhappiness they might cause.

In short, Mill has not succeeded in showing that happiness is the supreme value. There are other things which we value for their own sakes, and therefore utilitarianism makes a mistake in attributing so much importance to happiness.

**Motivation and the Limitless Moral Code**

Here Graham summarizes the objections raised so far to utilitarianism:

**The focus on happiness or pleasure (hedonic aspect) and on consequences do not work because there are other things which matter morally besides happiness and consequences of actions.**

A final objection that he raises is that utilitarianism does not explain why we should be moral. Rather, it seems to make enormous demands on us, which most of us would not want to accept.

1. It makes moral questions and moral demands constant
2. It implies that we should devote our energies to increasing other people’s happiness at the cost of our own, and that of our loved ones.

If utilitarianism is going to make such demands, then it should explain why we should follow them. But it does not, as we shall see, when we consider these points individually.

1. Utilitarianism implies that every action we take is a moral one, and that I am constantly faced with moral questions. Even a seemingly non-moral issue, such as what to have for dinner becomes a moral one. This is because as a result of my decision I could be making more or fewer people happy.

   [C.S. for example, I could decide to eat cheap, processed food which keeps people in third world countries locked into poverty, or I could go for organic, locally produced food which has fewer negative effects on the environment. Every single action has consequences, even non-action has consequences, and therefore utilitarianism seems to suggest that I should be deliberating at every moment upon the right thing to do at this moment. But this is a huge demand. Why should I do this, Graham asks?]
2. Here we encounter William Godwin’s example of the burning house. As a committed utilitarian, Godwin believed that given a choice between rescuing one’s mother (a maid) and rescuing the Archbishop from a burning house, one should save the Archbishop.

[C.S. the example is about a particular Archbishop, Fenelon, who was a great defender of human rights and therefore contributed greatly to general happiness. We could think instead of Desmond Tutu, or any other popular person who makes many people happy.]

In other words, utilitarianism seems to suggest that we must sometimes sacrifice our own happiness, or the happiness of our loved ones, if this will lead to an increase in general happiness. In any case, we must always treat our own happiness and the happiness of our loved ones on a par with that of everyone else. But why should we do this?

In short, just as we saw with Kantian ethics, we still need to find some motivation for acting morally. We saw, with Kant, that duty for duty’s sake was unappealing, and couldn’t explain why we should do our duty, especially when this does not make us happy. So we turned to utilitarianism, but found that we still need to find some reason for increasing general happiness. Therefore, the question remains, why should we be moral?

Two reasons are generally given to this:

1. Morality is based on social agreement (Chapter 8)
2. Morality is based on religion (Chapter 9)
Chapter 8: Contractualism

With the theories we have considered so far, we have always come up with the same problem - in brief, this is the is-ought problem. Even if we could agree with Kant’s prescription about doing our duty for its own sake, or with the utilitarian’s idea about maximizing happiness, the question remains, why should I do this, especially if it involves reducing my own happiness?

The subject of this chapter, contractualism, answers this question by positing that we are (somehow) bound by agreement to do what is right.

The Force of Agreement

Graham brings back the idea of a promise which was raised in chapter 1. We should keep our promises precisely because we promised to do so, and if anyone asks “why should I keep my promise?” we can answer “because agreeing to do something is what it means to make a promise.”

Agreement, then, can be thought of as a kind of promise, and so here Graham will talk about those theories, called contractualist theories, which argue that “the basic principles of morality are rooted in social agreement.”

If this is true, then it will make no difference whether I want to do what is right or not (whether it makes me happy to do so or not) - since I have agreed to do what is right, I cannot ignore this agreement.

Importantly, contractualism sees the agreement as a social one, and which is made by all members of a society so that the society will function properly. This means that the focus of contractualist thinkers (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Rawls) is mostly on political obligations rather than moral ones proper.

Contractualism contains two important ideas; the state of nature and the social contract

The State of Nature (Locke, Hobbes)

This is the idea of the world and human life, without social and political structures, i.e. without a government, without laws and law courts, without a police force or army, and without any commonly held idea of ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’

Contractualism argues that everyone will agree that life in the state of nature is not a pleasant one (Hobbes’ phrase “nasty, brutish and short” is worth remembering). People steal, kill each other for their property, in short, there is none of the security and peace we enjoy in society. In Hobbes’ words, life in the state of nature amounts to “a war of all against all.”

The social contract

Therefore, contractualists believe that our society can be seen as the result of a social contract which amounts to an agreement we make (or have made) to follow certain rules (laws), and to hand over some of our freedom to various authorities (governments, police etc.). In this way, we enjoy more freedom than we would in the state of nature (I can get on with living my life, rather than
having to be on the constant lookout for thieves, murderers etc.) In short, the social contract can be understood as an agreement to act morally, so that others too will act in the same way towards me, or at least, so that I shall have some form of protection against them if they do not.

[C.S. This is a thought-experiment, as therefore, as with all thought-experiments it is irrelevant whether or not it coincides with reality. Therefore, the fact that humans have probably never lived in such a “state of nature” (even other animals, like chimpanzees, have social obligations) or the fact that society does not always protect us from the wrongdoings of others, is not an argument against contractualism. This is because contractualism is not trying to describe reality with this thought-experiment, but merely trying to explain why we follow laws and act morally.]

The question that arises first is “when did I ever agree to abide by the rules of my country?” We have no choice where we are born, and it seems we have no choice except to follow the rules of the country we are born into, and therefore, a strong argument against contractualism is that, in fact, there has never been any form of social contract made.

Graham answers this question by reviewing the way in which two philosophers have replied:

Locke - who believed we all give ‘tacit’ consent, that is, even though I have never explicitly agreed to abide by the social contract, the fact that I use the amenities and resources of my country means I agree implicitly, or indirectly, to follow its laws etc.

Rawls - who believed that we give “hypothetical” consent, that is, even though we do not actually agree to abide by the social contract, we would agree to do so if we were in the sort of situation where we had to write the laws of our country, and we didn’t know what sort of lives we ourselves were going to have.

John Locke and Tacit Consent

Locke (1632 - 1704) argued against the idea that kings and queens were somehow given their power by God. This idea was radical in Locke’s times. Instead of viewing the monarchy as having a “divine right to rule,” Locke was suggesting that some forms of government were illegitimate, and some forms of rebellion were justified.

This is because, Locke claimed, kings and governments in general were there to serve the people, in that it was the people themselves who had given authority to their rulers, in exchange for the protection of their rights. Therefore, Locke was a believer in the social contract, or in his words, an “original compact” which involves the agreement to submit to the will of the majority, rather than live in the State of Nature (see citation on p 165).

Locke did recognize the problem that none of us have made an agreement to give up some of our freedom to our governments, in exchange for their protection. Therefore, he distinguishes between “express” and “tacit” consent:

Express (explicit, stated) consent: This would involve actually stating an agreement like signing a contract or saying “I agree to...” If we had explicitly agreed to the social contract, Locke believed, there would be no difficulty in recognizing our obligations to keep to that agreement.
Tacit (implicit, indirect) consent: This is a form of consent that depends not on what we have said (or written) but on our actions. For Locke, because we own property, make use of things such as roads, hotels and so forth (one can extend this to include schools, hospitals etc.) this implies that we agree to obey the laws of that government which provides such amenities. To opt out of the agreement, we would have to stop using any public services and even give up our private property (since it is the government which guarantees protection of private property).

Graham finds an objection to this. The way Locke described it, it is impossible for anyone to opt out of the agreement, i.e. to dissent. He cites David Hume’s analogy of a ship: Would we say that a person who has been carried onto a ship while asleep has agreed to follow the rules of the ship, just because he now uses the ship’s facilities? His only other option is to jump off into the ocean. Similarly, most people do not have the option to leave the society in which they were born, especially those who are poor.

[C.S. The only other option, perhaps, would be to go live in the jungle- but even then, most governments will not allow that!]

In short, according to Graham “my participation in society is not sufficient in itself to show that I have consented to the basic principles of conduct that enable that society to function” (p. 167).

John Rawls and 'Hypothetical' Consent

Rawls (1921 - 2002) avoids the problem of whether or not the state of nature would be one of perpetual war by describing an imaginary circumstance (the ‘original position’) in which the social agreement takes place. Suppose that we had to agree to the sort of society we would like to live in, without knowing what sort of lives we were going to have, i.e. whether we would be born rich or poor, intelligent or stupid, talented or talentless, healthy or disabled, male or female etc. (the ‘veil of ignorance’). According to Rawls, because we are rational and self-interested, we would all agree to the sort of society which allows as much individual freedom as possible, and because we do not know whether we will be among the advantaged or the disadvantaged, we will agree to the best possible situation for the disadvantaged (for example, we would agree to high taxes for the rich, in order to help the poor.)

Again, Rawls realizes that we have not actually agreed to this form of society, however, his argument is that we would agree to it, if we were in that sort of situation. In other words, he argues that this sort of society is the right one, because this is what we would agree to if we found ourselves in the original position, under a veil of ignorance.

A common objection to Rawls is that this is not in fact what people would choose - that some people would prefer to take a risk with the possibility of making a large personal gain, rather than opt for the ‘safest bet.’ For instance, if I knew I had a 10% chance of being one of the rich, 20% chance of being among the middle class, and 70% chance of being among the poor, I might still opt for a society where the rich and middle class have a much better life than the poor, and simply take my chances.
In any case, Graham’s objection is that Rawls’s idea of hypothetical agreement (“this is what people would agree to do if they had to be in this situation...”) is not enough to explain our obligation to follow moral rules, because an obligation only follows an actual agreement, not a hypothetical one.

[C.S. Compare: “if you knew what was good for you, you would agree to give all your money to the Church.” Could we say then, that this person has agreed to this, simply because she would have agreed, if she knew what was good for her? Could we say she should give her money away, just because she would have agreed...?]

Rawls tried to show how the fact that we are rational means we would agree to a certain society. We saw that this hypothetical agreement does not work. So perhaps the social contract can be explained, not through agreement, but through reason. This is what Hobbes aimed to do.

**Hobbes and the Dictates of Practical Reason**

Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679) gave the most negative portrayal of the state of nature, which he described as a “war of all against all” and as having no place for industry, farming, travel, comfortable buildings, no arts, no knowledge etc., only fear, danger and violence. Human life, under these circumstances, is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (see citation p. 170).

In other words, for Hobbes, people are naturally egoistic, and the problem is in that such a state, nobody’s desires can be fulfilled. Therefore, society is necessary and the question is how to set up a society where people will be free enough to pursue their desires, without being prevented from doing this by other people, who are similarly pursuing their own desires.

To explain this, Graham gives an example of an overfished lake. Suppose that he only way to make sure that fishermen can continue to make a living from the lake is to set up individual quotas - nobody can take more than $x$ number of fish per day. What are the fishermen’s options?

1. To stick to the quota when everybody else does the same - then he loses a little bit, but not more than everyone else.
2. To stick to the quota when others do not - then he loses more than everyone else does.
3. Not to stick to the quota when everybody else does - then he can gain more than anyone else.
4. Not to stick to the quota when neither does anyone else - in this case, everybody loses, but he does not lose any more than others do.

Of course, if I am rational and self-interested, I would choose 3. But then, so would everybody else and this means that we would all lose our livelihoods. In short, if we all act rationally, and self-interestedly, we all lose out - this is a paradox.

[C.S. this example is similar to the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ and to Hardin’s ‘Tragedy of the Commons.’]

*The prisoner’s dilemma*: suppose two criminals are arrested and charged with a crime they have in fact committed. The police offer a reduced sentence for whoever confesses (they have no hard evidence against either). The person who does not confess will get a heavier sentence.

Of course, the rational, self-interested thing to do is for both of them to keep silent, as without evidence, they will be set free. However, each prisoner does not know what the other will do. This
means that the probability is that they will both confess to the crime, and get sent to prison. Again, rational self-interest leads to the worst outcome.

The tragedy of the commons is like the fishing example above. Each cowherd makes use of a common space for grazing his cattle. Too many cattle will result in soil erosion and so on, until the land becomes useless. But rational self-interest will result in each cowherd adding more to his stock until eventually, the land is overgrazed, and nobody can use it anymore.

Graham argues that to solve this paradox we have to make it in the interests of all fishermen to stick to the quota, and this involves adding the clauses that everyone else sticks to the quota because if not they will suffer. In other words, the individual fishermen in this example need to know how what others will do, and they can only know this, if others are forced to stick to the quota.

Hobbes believed that laws and social institutions to enforce them are necessary because they are the only way to resolve the paradox between individual rational self-interest and the common good. The only way to stop the lake from being overfished is to make fishermen stick to the rules. Agreement, whether actual, tacit or hypothetical, is not enough; there has to be some sort of coercion, individuals have to be made to follow the rules, whether they want to or not.

Hobbes argument shows that we should accept the authority of the state, even though we might not want to, because it is in our long-term interests, although it might conflict with our immediate desires.

However, the question we started out with was why should I act morally? We have explained why we should follow the laws of the state, but does this mean that the state determines what is morally right or wrong?

**Politics, Morality and Religion**

Most people do not accept that the state determines moral right from wrong:

1. Western thought sees politics and morality as distinct, and the ideal of political liberalism suggests that the state should not interfere in moral beliefs (e.g. marriage, homosexuality, abortion...)
2. Many actions we think of as immoral (lying, gossiping etc.) or moral (generosity, kindness) cannot be regulated by laws.
3. States themselves are subject to moral appraisal; that is, we can argue against some forms of political structures (like Nazism, apartheid etc.) only on the basis of morality. This means that the state cannot itself determine what is morally right or wrong.

Hobbes’s theory was criticized because it seemed to make the state or government a sort of God, which we have to obey whether we like it or not. This is why Locke responded by putting the rights of individuals first and arguing that the function of the government was to protect these.

Locke believed that the rights of individuals, and by extension, the moral law, were God-given. The final chapter will turn to the idea that the ultimate source of morality is God or religion.
Chapter 9 - Ethics, Religion and the Meaning of Life

The Argument So Far:

[C.S. On pp. 176 - 179 there is a summary of argument so far, with the main objections raised by Graham. READ IT! If you can follow it easily, then this shows that you have reached a good understanding of the subject.]

Conclusion: we need an account of the good life which can satisfy personal freedom and happiness (subjective values) as well as provide a rational basis for moral demands (objective value).

The Authority of Morality

The problem we keep coming up with is this:

Any ethical theory that describes the good life in an objective manner (e.g. utilitarianism - maximize happiness; Kantianism - do whatever reason shows to be your duty) is always open to the question – “why should I live this way?”

So then we turn to a theory where the good life is shown to be somehow better for us, or to have subjective value (e.g. egoism - do what you want; hedonism - do what gives you pleasure). However, we then end up losing the moral aspect of the good life.

The solution Graham will provide in this chapter is based on religion and appeals to God to explain what the good life is. He will argue that doing what is moral, in the sense of following God’s command, is also good for us, in the sense that it will make us happy.

If this argument works, then it will reconcile objective value (the good life is objectively good, because God wills it) and subjective value (the good life is also good for me, it makes me happy).

There are, of course, problems with appealing to God to explain morality:

1. Does an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God exist?
2. Can we know His will?
3. Can the appeal to God really explain morality?

1. The Existence of God and the Problem of Evil

The ‘problem of evil’ is an important issue when it comes to determining whether God exists and whether we can understand morality through Him.

In Christianity, God is understood to possess all perfections, i.e. He is both omnipotent (i.e. He can do anything, there is nothing He cannot do) and omnibenevolent (i.e. He is perfectly good all the time, He has nothing but love for His creation and for us).

The problem of evil is this: how can God allow so much evil in the world (e.g. the Holocaust. Earthquakes, cancer etc.)? If He can do anything and loves His creation so much, why does He not prevent these things from happening?
Hume (following Epicurus) put it this way: “Is He willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent....”

Mill raised the same problem: there is no way we can possibly understand Nature (i.e. the world) to be the work of a being which is both good and omnipotent.

The problem of evil is usually taken as proof that God does not exist at all (although another option would be to accept that God does exist, but that He is either not omnibenevolent, or not omnipotent. Other religions do have this idea of god.)

2. The Problem of Religious Knowledge

Different religions all claim to ‘know’ what God wants for us (e.g. Do not eat pork, do not eat beef, shave off your hair, never cut your hair etc.)

How do we decide on which advice to accept? All religions claim to be based on divine revelation, and on these grounds alone, we have no way of deciding which is right and which isn’t.

We would need some other criterion (e.g. religion x is more rational, or religion y has more historical evidence to support it; religion z is better suited to the modern world).

But then, we would no longer be appealing to religion itself to support our moral claims, but to some other factor (e.g. rationality, historical evidence, modern ideals.)

3. The Euthyphro Dilemma

The Euthyphro is a dialogue, written by Plato, where Socrates discusses the problem of ‘piety’ with Euthyphro, who had a reputation for being very pious. Euthyphro was in the process of taking his own father to court for having killed (unintentionally) a worker.

Euthyphro claims that, unlike other people, who could not understand why he was prosecuting his own father, he knows what the divine law is, that is, he knows what the gods expect from him, or what the right thing to do is.

Socrates then asks a question which brings into focus problem 3 (i.e. do we gain anything by appealing to God to explain morality?)

The question Socrates asks is: “is something good because it is desired by the gods, or is it desired by the gods because it is good?” In other words:

- Is it the fact that God wants me to do x which makes x good? (x would not be good in this case, if God didn’t happen to want it)
- Or does God want me to do x because x is already good? (God wants it precisely because it is good)

If we choose the first option, then if God wanted us to kill everyone who was weaker than us, for example, this would be the right thing to do. There is nothing good or bad about being kind, generous etc. in itself, these virtues just happen to be good, because God happens to approve of them. Somehow, this does not seem like a satisfactory answer.
If we choose the second option, then we cannot explain why something is good through appealing to God. For example, being generous would be good whether or not there is a God who approves of it. This means that, to answer problem 3, we do not gain anything by trying to explain morality through God. We could explain why x is good, without referring to God.

These three problems seem to suggest that we cannot explain morality through religion. However Graham will now argue that religion might contribute after all to our understanding of ethics.

**Religious Experience and Religious Practice**

[C.S. With regards to problem 1, Graham points out that rather than being evidence that God does not exist, evil is sometimes that which leads people to think God exists. For example, many people have religious experiences when they are going through difficult times. More will be said about this below.

Regarding problem 2, Graham explains that religion is not mainly concerned with what the right or wrong thing to do is, but with how to develop a relationship with the divine. (Here Graham is talking about the sacred texts, the word of Christ etc. and not with what institutionalized religion, i.e. the Church and so on, tell us.)

Even the Ten Commandments seem to be mainly about how we should relate to God. That is, religions are concerned mainly with the religious life for its own sake, and not with ethics.

Graham concludes from this that religion is not just any other activity, but involves a complete change of perspective, from which we can assess our lives and ethics. Religion is important, because it can provide a meaning to our lives, from which we can then decide upon our ethics.

**The Myth of Sisyphus**

The meaning of life is explored in Camus’s essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The important part of the story of Sisyphus is that he was punished by the gods and made to roll a large stone up a hillside, which, having reached the top, would simply roll back down again. Sisyphus then has to push it back up again ad infinitum. All of his days are spent in this way, and there is no prospect of him ever succeeding in this project.

Thus, Sisyphus’s life is pointless, meaningless, and absurd, because nothing is achieved. Importantly, Camus believed that all our lives are like this:

- The very fact that we will die makes all our projects ultimately pointless (all our money, fame, education and so on will be lost once we are gone.)
- There is no objective meaning to our lives (i.e. no God who gives meaning)
- Our existence is contingent (i.e. I could easily have never been born and this would make no real difference to the world.)

All this makes our lives **absurd** (see chapter on Existentialism).

How can we respond to this absurdity? Camus suggests that the best way is to revolt against it, and he calls this being an ‘absurd hero.’ This is the way Sisyphus responds; he hates death, he hates the
gods and he hates the whole absurdity of the situation. However, this somehow leads to his happiness.

The question is now, do we have to be ‘absurd heroes’ to reach happiness. Two thought experiments bring this out:

1. What if Sisyphus was given an injection to make him feel that rolling stones up and down the hill is the most meaningful thing he could do with his life?

   Although Sisyphus’s life still has no objective meaning (because there is no real point in what he is doing) it now has subjective value (Sisyphus himself finds some meaning in it, he thinks it’s a good life.)

2. What if, although Sisyphus does not know this, the stones are actually being used to construct a magnificent temple at the top of the hill?

   Here Sisyphus’s life has no subjective value (he still finds the activity pointless) but there is objective meaning (because there is, actually, a point in what he is doing, even though he does not know it.)

**Subjective Value and Objective Meaning**

With example 1 above, even though Sisyphus’s life has subjective value, we still find the activity pointless, and in fact, we might pity him even more, because as well as being condemned to live a pointless life, he is deluded about it, and thinks it is meaningful.

In other words, Graham is arguing that subjective value alone cannot grant meaning to a life; such meaning has to be grounded in something objective.

At the same time, as we see in example 2, the fact that there is a point to Sisyphus’s work does not in itself give it meaning; Sisyphus has to be aware of that meaning and to understand it himself.

Graham’s conclusion so far is that subjective value or objective meaning alone is not enough to give meaning to a life. There has to be some value in it objectively, but at the same time, that person also has to recognize this value subjectively.

[C.S. to return to the discussion of God - Graham here is suggesting that, God needs to be both an objective truth and subjectively recognized in order to give my life meaning. If there is a God, who has some plan for me (objective meaning), but I don’t know about it, or I do not accept His plan (subjective value) then God cannot give meaning to my life.

At the same time, if I happen to believe in a God and that He has some plan for me, which I accept (subjective value), but God does not actually exist (objectively), then again, this is not enough for my life to have meaning.]

The problem of the subjective and objective has recurred throughout the book:
Egoism: Emphasize what I want, what is pleasurable to me, or what I choose - i.e. subjective value. They leave out objective value - what if what I want, what I choose etc. are wrong?

Hedonism: Emphasize duty, general happiness - i.e. objective value. This leaves out subjective value - why should I do this if it does not benefit me?

Existentialism:

Kantianism

Utilitarianism

Therefore, to find an answer to “what is the good (and meaningful) life?” we need to include both objective meaning and subjective value.

However, some philosophers do not think that this is possible. The fact that everything changes and that even human existence will eventually come to an end means that what is important for us (subjectively, i.e. individually or as a species) cannot be important from the point of view of the universe (objectively).

**The Religious Perspective**

Some religions are often seen as aiming at the uniting of the temporal (our human lives) with the eternal (God) and if this can be done, then we will have united subjective value with objective meaning.

Monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) claim that God created the world and when He did that, He actually created goodness out of nothing. He created the world for a purpose and all the different parts of creation are good because they all somehow contribute to this purpose.

This means that the good cannot be independent of God’s will. Therefore, we have reached an idea of objective goodness, which is found in the meaning which God has given to His creation, or His purpose for us.

However, humans can desire something different from what God wills; we can reject God and his plans for us. Therefore subjective value and objective value are not always the same.

The ideal situation is where subjective value and objective value are brought in line with each other, that is, where we desire and value that which God wills and approves of.

Can this idea solve the problems we met above?
The Three Difficulties Reconsidered

1. The problem of evil

From this perspective what is evil is not things like the Holocaust, earthquakes, cancer and so on, but whatever prevents me from establishing the sort of relationship with God where my subjective value comes to correspond with His purpose and plan for me, i.e. the objective meaning of my life.

Moreover, God’s ‘love’ is not to be understood in an ordinary sense that he will give me whatever I want, but in the sense that He is always ready to give a ‘relationship of communion’ with His creatures. Therefore, things like cancer and so on are not evidence against God’s love.

In fact, as we saw above, such other things we might say are evil (Holocaust etc.) could even cause me to find God.

2. The Problem of Religious Knowledge

If we ignore religious prescriptions on what to eat, what to wear, who to marry and so on, and focus only on the advice which is meant to enable us to enjoy communion with God, most religions in fact agree on what it is to live a good life.

[C.S. For example, prayer, solitude, spending time in silence, and having less activity are recommended by various religious traditions as ways to get closer to God. Similarly, most religions agree on major moral issues, such as not to kill, not to steal and so forth.]

3. The Euthyphro dilemma

As we saw, in order to decide whether x is good in and of itself, without appealing to God, we had to bring in another criterion, such as rationality, modern standards and so forth. If we said that x is good only because God happens to want it, this left us with the problem that if God happened to want us to murder each other, we would have to say that murder is good.

However, we now have another way to decide whether x is good, which also appeals to God, but is not dependent on what He happens to want. We can say that x is good if it enables us to enter into communion with Him.

Here Graham gives an analogy: Suppose that we have two acts of a play. We can enjoy these on their own, but we cannot see how they fit with each other, because we no longer have the play as a whole. Later on, we rediscover the entire play, and the two acts seem to make much more sense.

Graham suggests that religion is analogous to the entire play, while the two acts correspond to subjective value (i.e. the good life for me, having a good life - i.e. getting my wants, pleasure, freedom etc.) and objective value (i.e. leading a good life in the moral sense - i.e. duty, maximizing happiness etc.).

Without religion we cannot see how these two fit together. However, once we take religion into account they both seem to have a part to play - both personal happiness (subjective value) and
moral conduct (objective value) are important for re-establishing a relationship of communion with God.

*The Unity of the Objective and the Subjective - ‘Where True Joys are to be Found’*

According to Graham, the best sort of happiness we can find is where our subjective value falls in line with God’s purpose for us, where we want to cooperate in His plan.

While this is certainly a way of resolving the problem, Graham is well aware that it raises just as many new difficulties:

- Explaining religious experiences and knowledge is not easy, it cannot be done in simple words, and often, after reading religious texts we are left more confused than before.
- Religious insight cannot be gained by reading books or doing philosophy, but needs to be experienced personally. Moreover, it seems to depend on a prior element of faith, which again, we cannot attain through reason.

Therefore, to bring in religion as a solution to our problems of ethics will probably only work for those who already have faith; to others it won’t seem as much of a solution.

So, where does that leave us? We have the following options:

1. We can accept the dichotomy between subjective and objective values. Most people in fact pay most attention to personal wants and some attention to moral demands. Graham believes this sort of life is philosophically unsatisfactory.

2. We can opt for either subjective or objective value and choose any theory of ethics to subscribe to. However, since we have seen there are so many problems with each of these theories, this too is philosophically unsatisfactory.

3. We start all over again, checking the arguments we brought against the theories we discussed, to see if we can discover anything new.

[C.S. Remember Graham is a moral rationalist? His position is that we have gained something from thinking about ethical issues in a rational way. Even if we have only discovered that none of these theories seem to be able to stand up alone, or that there is an unsolvable dilemma between objective and subjective value, these facts are worth discovering in themselves. Of course, if we start our studies of ethics all over again, we might discover something else which is worth discovering...]