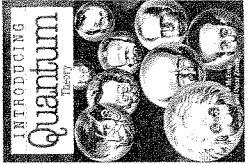
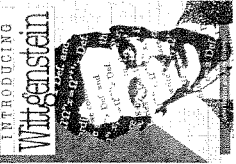
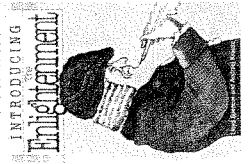
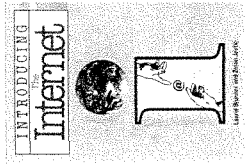
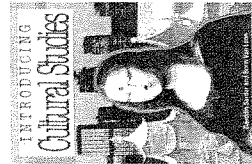


Also available from Totem

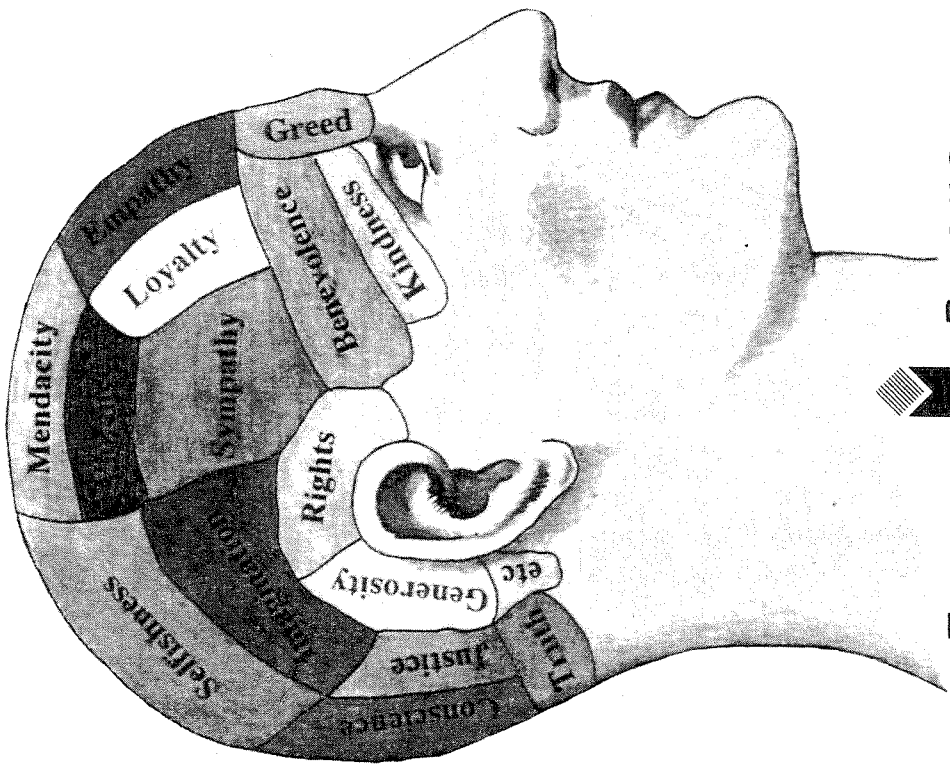


INTRODUCING

Ethics

Dave Robinson and Chris Garratt

Edited by Richard Appignanesi



TOTEM BOOKS

Moral Questions

Everyone is interested in ethics. We all have our own ideas about what is right and what is wrong and how we can tell the difference. Philosophers and bishops discuss moral "mazes" on the radio. People no longer behave as they should.

First published in the United States in 1997 by Totem Books
Inquiries to PO Box 223, Canal Street Station
New York, NY 10013

Reprinted 1998

Distributed to the trade in the United States
by National Book Network Inc.,
4720 Boston Way, Lanham, Maryland 20706

Text copyright © 1996 Dave Robinson
Illustrations copyright © 1996 Chris Garratt

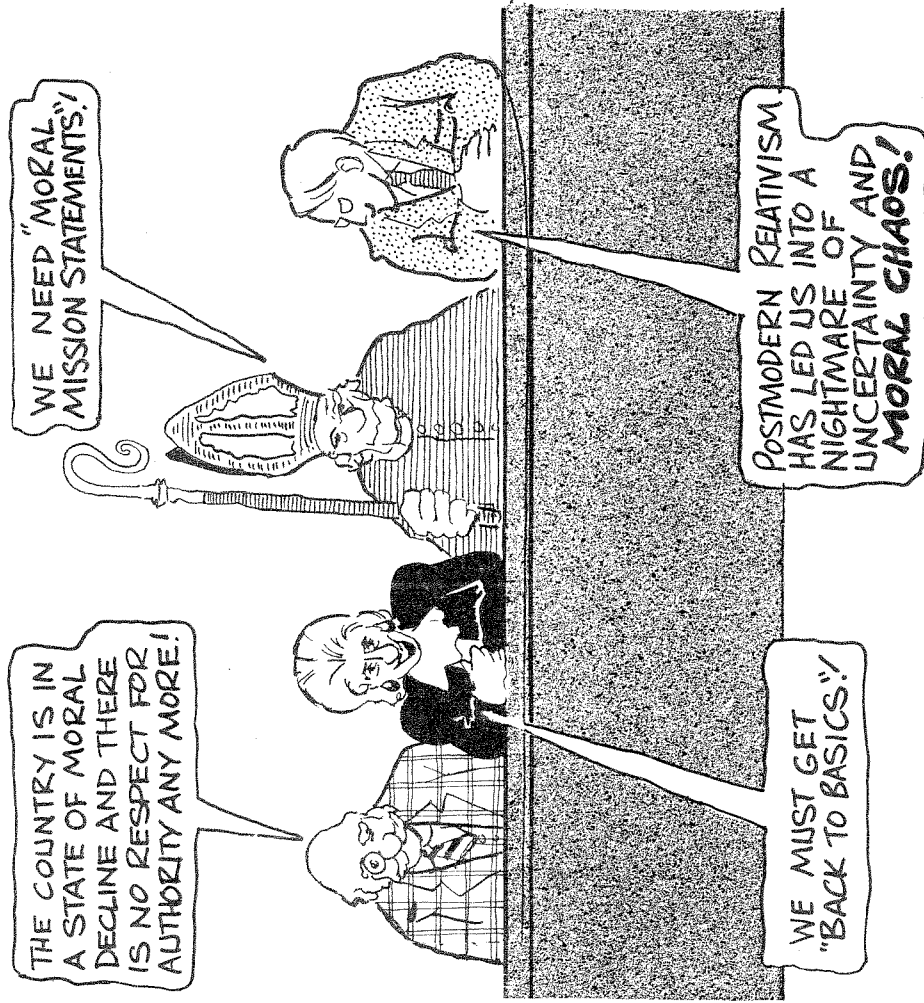
Originating editor: Richard Appignanesi

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, or by any means,
without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 1 874166 40 4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-061108

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd., Guildford and King's Lynn



So we're told. But there have always been "moral panics". Plato thought 4th century B.C. Athens was doomed because of the wicked ethical scepticism of the Sophist philosophers and the credulity of his fellow citizens.

Social Beings

We are all products of particular societies. We do not "make ourselves". We owe much of what we consider to be our "identity" and "personal opinions" to the community in which we live. This made perfect sense to Aristotle. For Aristotle, the primary function of the state was to enable collectivist human beings to have philosophical discussions and eventually agree on a shared code of ethics.



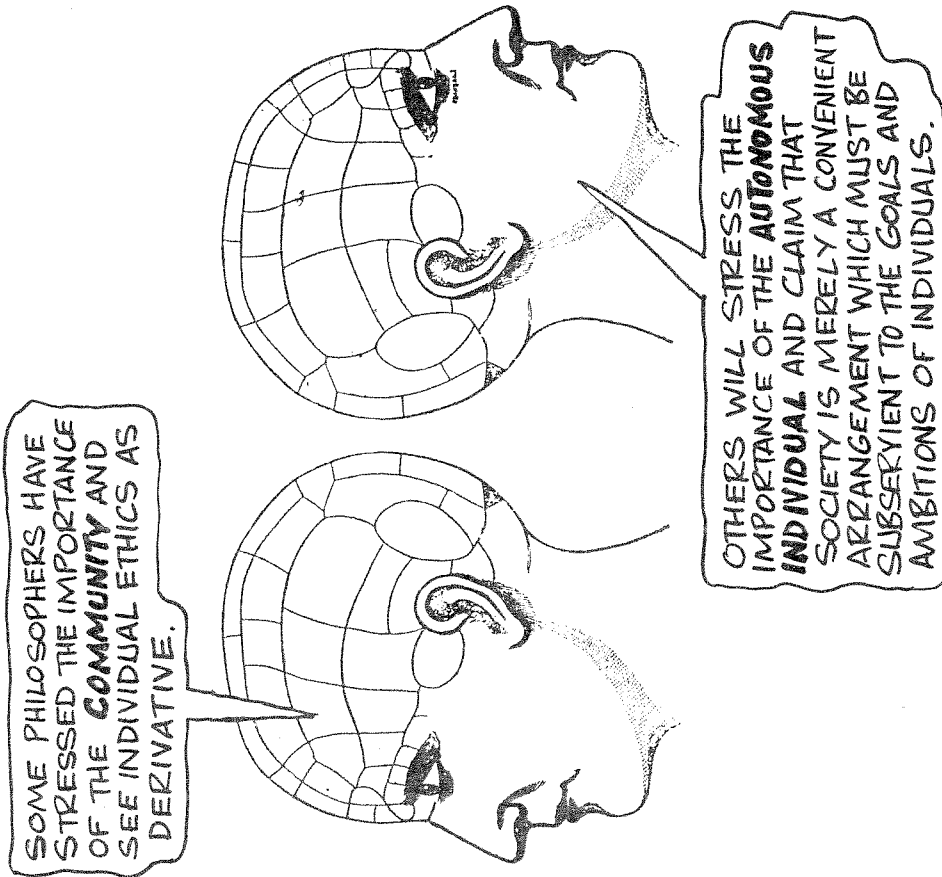
But as soon as we are formed, most of us start to question the society that has made us, and do so in a way that seems unique to us. Socrates stressed that it was in fact our duty.



The State may decide what is legally right and wrong, but the law and morality are not the same thing.

Communitarians or Individualists?

Ethics is complicated because our morality is an odd mixture of received tradition and personal opinion.



Both individualist and communitarian philosophers are reluctant to explain away ethics as no more than "club rules" agreed upon and formalized by members. Both want to legitimize either communal ethics or the need for an individual morality by appealing to some kind of "neutral" set of ideals. Much of this book is about these different attempts to provide a foundation for ethics.

The Social Origins of Belief Systems

It seems very unlikely that any society has ever existed in which individual members have thought the murder of others to be acceptable. Although the odd serial killer does occasionally surface in any society, most of us think of one as an exceptional aberration, or even as "non-human".



There have always been rules about when men may kill other men — usually outsiders as opposed to insiders.



Such moral understandings are often codified and regulated by religious and legal taboos of various kinds. Human beings seem reluctant to accept that morality is something invented by themselves and so tend to legitimize moral rules by mythologizing their origins: "The Great White Parrot says stealing is wrong". The story of ethics is to some extent a description of attempts like these to legitimize morality.

Morality and Religion

Most people living in Western Christian societies would say that they base their ethical beliefs and behaviour on the ten negative commandments, rather inconveniently carved on stone tablets handed to Moses by God. (Of the ten, only about six are actually ethical.)

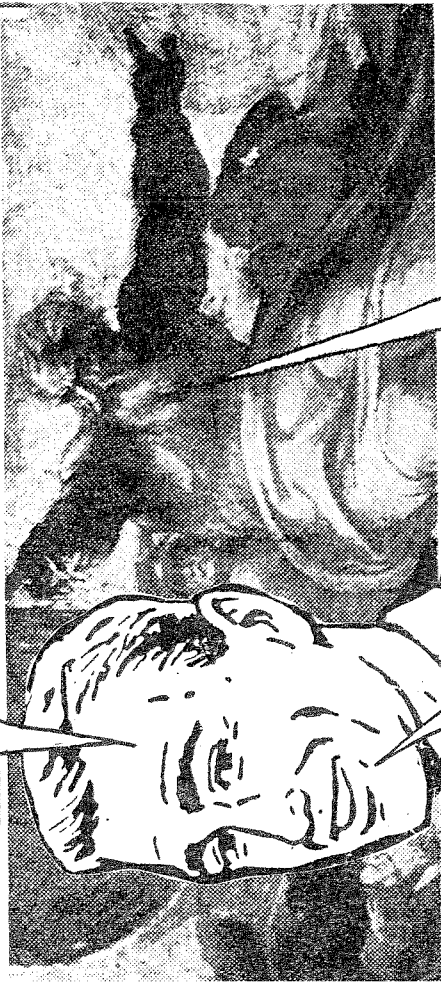


This "reciprocity rule" has a long track record and is found in many different religions worldwide. It is a bit like prudent insurance — a sensible way of getting along in the world, even if it's not quite what Jesus Christ says. (His moral code is much more radical and not at all "reciprocal". You have to do good deeds to those who have done you no good at all. This is why real Christianity is a hard act to follow.)

Is religion where morality comes from? Is being moral simply a matter of obeying divine commands? Independently-minded individuals, like Socrates (in Plato's *Euthyphro*), said that there is more to morality than religious obedience. One reason for this is that religious commands vary from one religion to another.

YOU CAN HAVE FOUR WINES IF YOU FOLLOW THIS RELIGION, AND ONLY ONE IF YOU FOLLOW THAT ONE...

THE MORAL COMMANDS OF CHRISTIANITY OFTEN SEEM CONTRADICTORY...



...THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SEEMS PROFOUNDLY ANTI-GAY AND HARDLY PLURALIST...

TOO RIGHT, PAL! THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME... ..FOR I THE LORD THY GOD AM A JEALOUS GOD...

Atheists and agnostics would refuse to obey any order from God they believed to be wrong. Religion on its own doesn't seem to be a complete and satisfactory foundation for human ethical beliefs. What many philosophers search for is a way of justifying moral values which are independent of religious belief.

Morality and Human Nature

One alternative answer is to say that morality comes not from external supernatural sources but from ourselves. This raises one of the big questions of all time.

ARE HUMAN BEINGS ESSENTIALLY GOOD OR ESSENTIALLY WICKED?

WHAT IS HUMAN NATURE?



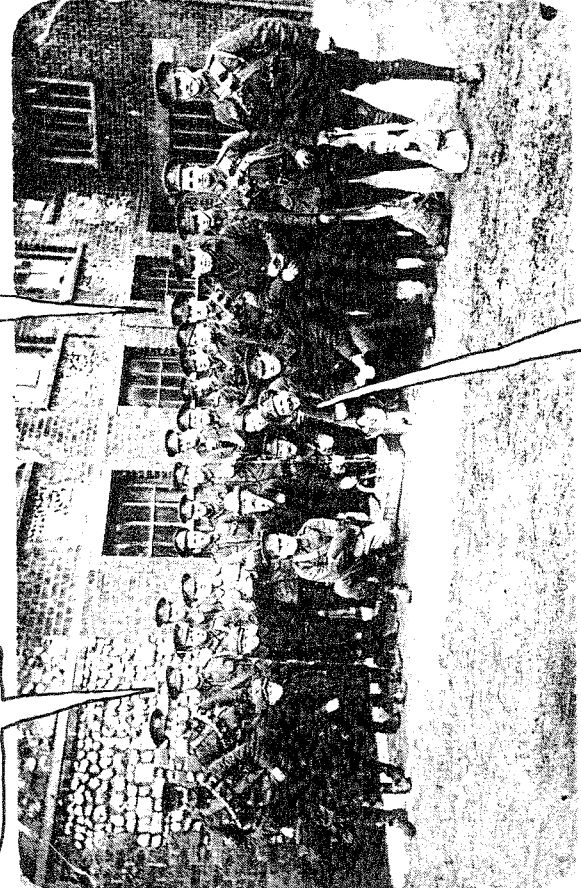
IS IT EVEN POSSIBLE FOR US TO DEFINE IT OR GENERALIZE ABOUT A SPECIES WHICH INCLUDES LONDON BUS INSPECTORS, KALAHARI BUSHMEN, ITALIAN TENORS, MAHATMA GANDHI, AND ADOLF HITLER?

Thinking on ethics often begins with assumptions about human nature, either negative or positive. For instance, the Christian notion of "original sin" takes the view that our nature is "fallen" and essentially bad. If this is the case, then it is our social environment and its legal sanctions that force us all to be moral. But the reason most of us don't torture children is because we think it is **wrong**, not because we fear a visit from the police.

This negative Christian verdict is an example of the "programmed" view of human nature. There is an opposite "Romantic" view of human nature which assumes it to be positively programmed for good.

MOST PEOPLE LIKE TO FLATTER THEMSELVES THAT THEY CHOOSE TO DO GOOD ACTS RATHER THAN BEING "PROGRAMMED" TO DO THEM.

SO, PERHAPS SOCIETY HAS VERY LITTLE TO DO WITH THE FUNDAMENTAL MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF OUR CHARACTERS?

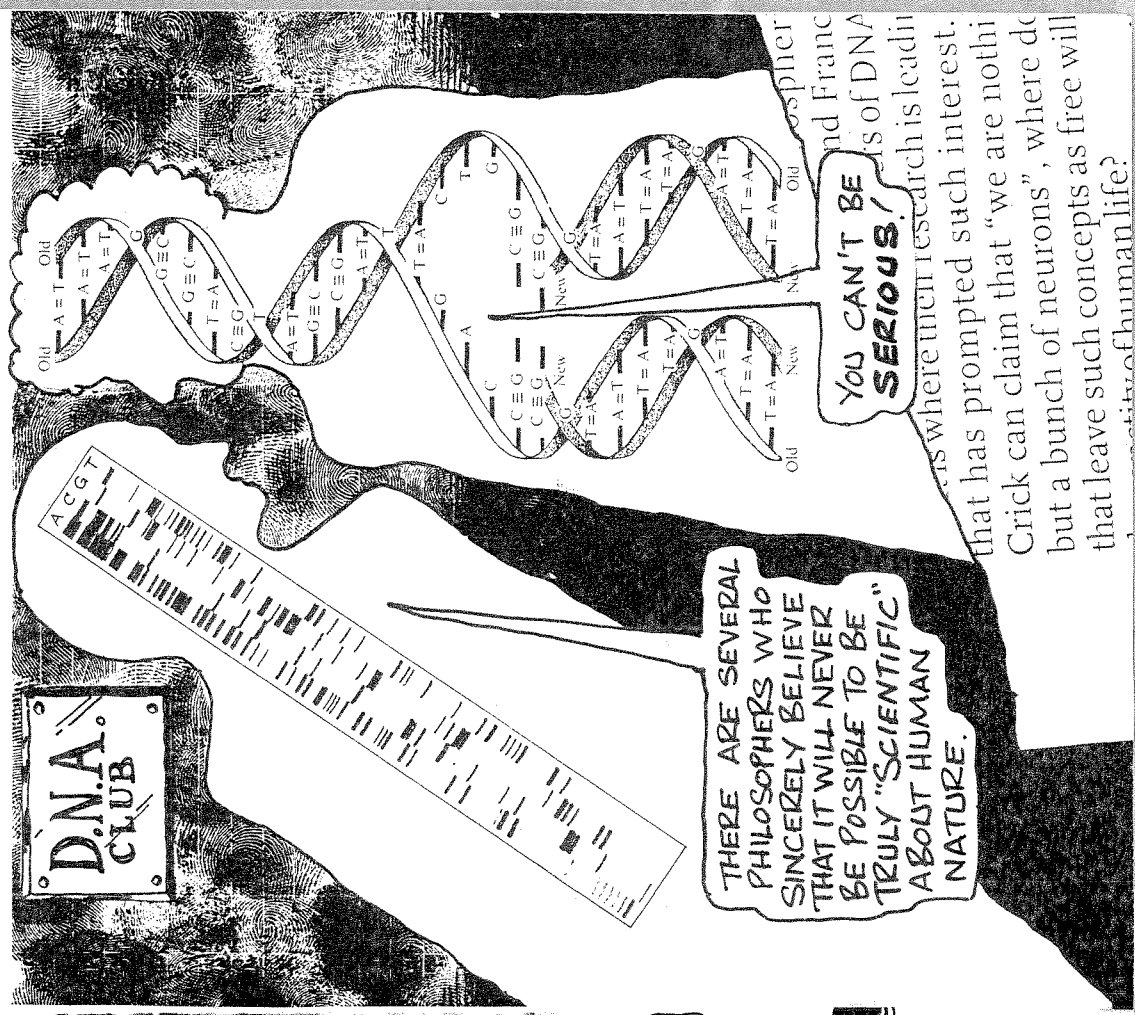


IT MAY IN FACT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR MANY HUMAN EVILS.

Men may kill other men in different uniforms because society encourages them to do so, but their genetic instincts might be to do things like play football and drink beer with each other.

Genetics

Nowadays, arguments about human nature centre more and more on genetics. Words like "selfish gene" and "altruistic gene" turn up in popular science articles, but no-one is sure yet what these terms mean or what the full implications of them are. Geneticists use the word "selfish" in an odd sort of way, so that many people now assume erroneously that it is possible to identify "criminality" from DNA. Genetics is an empirical science, but the subsequent arguments and discussions about "human nature" that new genetic "facts" stimulate are full of political myths, ideological assertions and dangerous tosh.



THERE ARE SEVERAL PHILOSOPHERS WHO SINCERELY BELIEVE THAT IT WILL NEVER BE POSSIBLE TO BE TRULY "SCIENTIFIC" ABOUT HUMAN NATURE.

YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!

where their research is leading... that has prompted such interest. Crick can claim that "we are nothing but a bunch of neurons", where do that leave such concepts as free will that of human life?

The whole debate is highly speculative and unscientific. Worse, it may be what philosophers call a form of "language bewitchment". We assume that because there are convenient human terms like "good" and "bad" and "human nature" that there are real physical concrete entities to which these words refer. They very probably don't exist as "genes" at all. Geneticists prefer words like "potential", "propensity" and "encourage" rather than "cause" or "determine".

ONE GENE MAY GIVE SOMEONE A PROPENSITY FOR VERTIGO WHICH MIGHT ENCOURAGE THEM TO LIVE IN FLAT AREAS.



BUT IT DIDN'T STOP ME FROM BECOMING A MOUNTAIN CLIMBER. THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN MY CHILDHOOD WERE STRONG ENOUGH AND I HAD WILL POWER.

Talk about genes means that the old and eternally unsolvable debate about "nature versus nurture" crops up and drags all the usual political baggage along with it. Those who wish to preserve political power structures are often very keen on **genetic determinism**.

Do We Have Any Choice?

Some philosophers maintain that DNA and social environment have little or no influence on the sorts of people we become and the moral choices that we make. We are almost wholly autonomous individuals who make our own moral decisions in life and therefore we alone are responsible for all the good and bad things that we do. After all, without free will, we are little more than robots and cannot be moral beings at all. It is a commonplace in ethics that "ought implies can". You can't even begin to talk about morality, unless you assume that human beings have freedom to choose.

IT JUST ISN'T SENSIBLE TO CALL CATS "WICKED" WHEN THEY KILL MICE.

BUT WE DO THINK THAT HITLER AND CHARLES MANSON WERE RIGHTLY PUNISHED FOR THEIR WICKED BEHAVIOUR.



THEIR GENETIC MAKEUP AND EARLY SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT ARE NOT GOOD ENOUGH EXCUSES FOR WHAT THEY DID.


Nevertheless, "commonsense" views like these can be naive or prejudiced. A brutal society can often have a strong negative influence on the formation of someone's moral character.

Is Society to Blame?

Even if DNA has little or no influence on our moral character, perhaps we are still products of our social and cultural environment. At birth, we are blank sheets of paper that are gradually written on by parents, teachers, peer groups, the media and all sorts of other ideological forces. The influence of society on our moral personalities is infinitely stronger than any genetic inheritance and almost totally responsible for everything that makes us both human and moral. This means that it is nonsense to talk about some absurd fiction like "human nature", as if it has some kind of pre-societal existence. This view is held by many sociologists:



THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS INNATE "HUMAN NATURE" — ONLY CITIZENS INTERNALIZING EXTERNAL MORAL CODES.

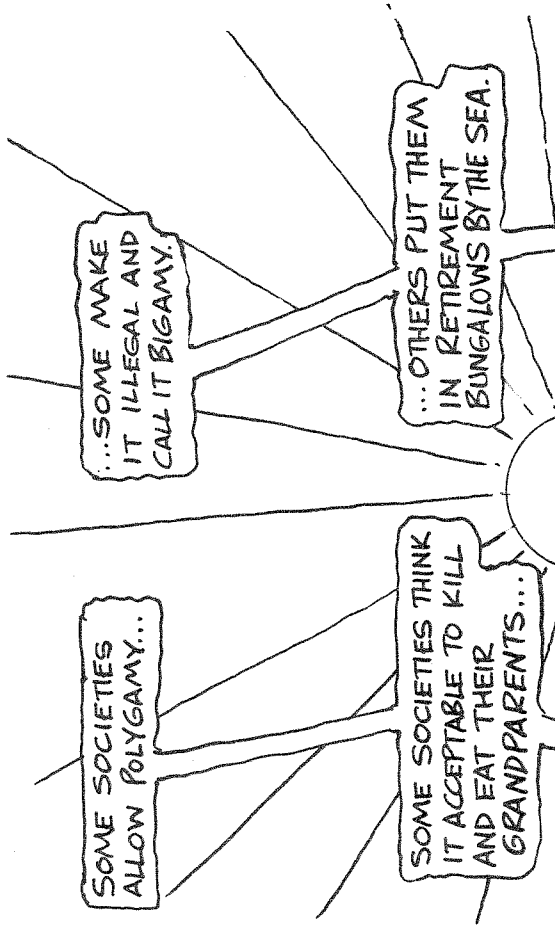


IT IS ALSO A VIEW HELD BY MANY MARXISTS WHO BELIEVE WE ARE MERELY PRODUCTS OF THE IDEOLOGIES OF THE DOMINANT CLASS.

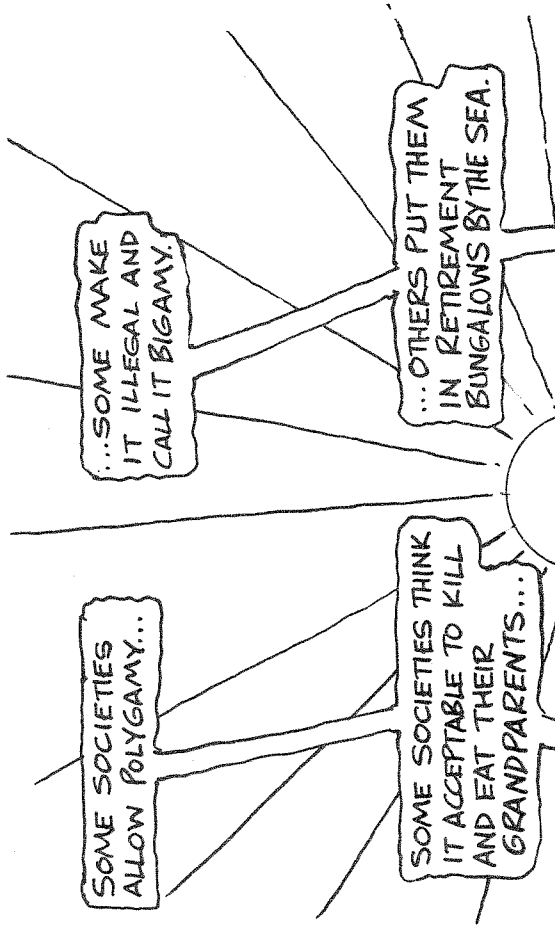


IF I AM BAD (OR GOOD), THEN SOCIETY IS TO BLAME, RIGHT?

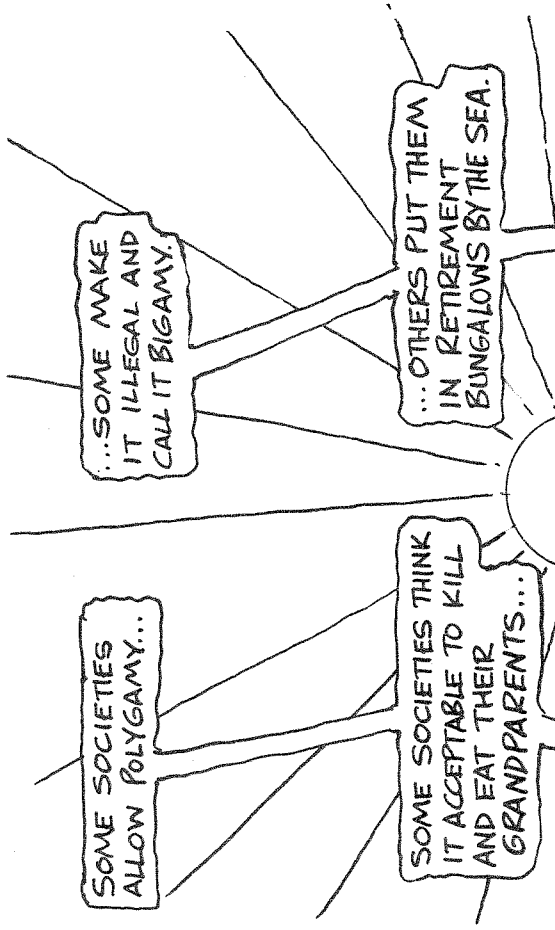
Human nature might either be wholly **plastic**, and subsequently given "ethical shape" by social forces, or a **programmed** bundle of moral software. What puzzles philosophers is the variation in ethical beliefs held by different societies at different times.



SOME SOCIETIES ALLOW POLYGAMY...



...SOME MAKE IT ILLEGAL AND CALL IT BIGAMY.



SOME SOCIETIES THINK IT ACCEPTABLE TO KILL AND EAT THEIR GRANDPARENTS...



...OTHERS PUT THEM IN RETIREMENT BUNGALOWS BY THE SEA.



IT LOOKS AS IF BELIEFS AND VALUES ARE PRETTY RELATIVE!

Moral Relativism

The recognition of this wide variety of ethical beliefs and practices is usually called **moral relativism**. Differences in moral belief exist between different countries and tribes, but can also exist between different subcultures within a society, or between different classes. History also demonstrates how time alters moral beliefs.

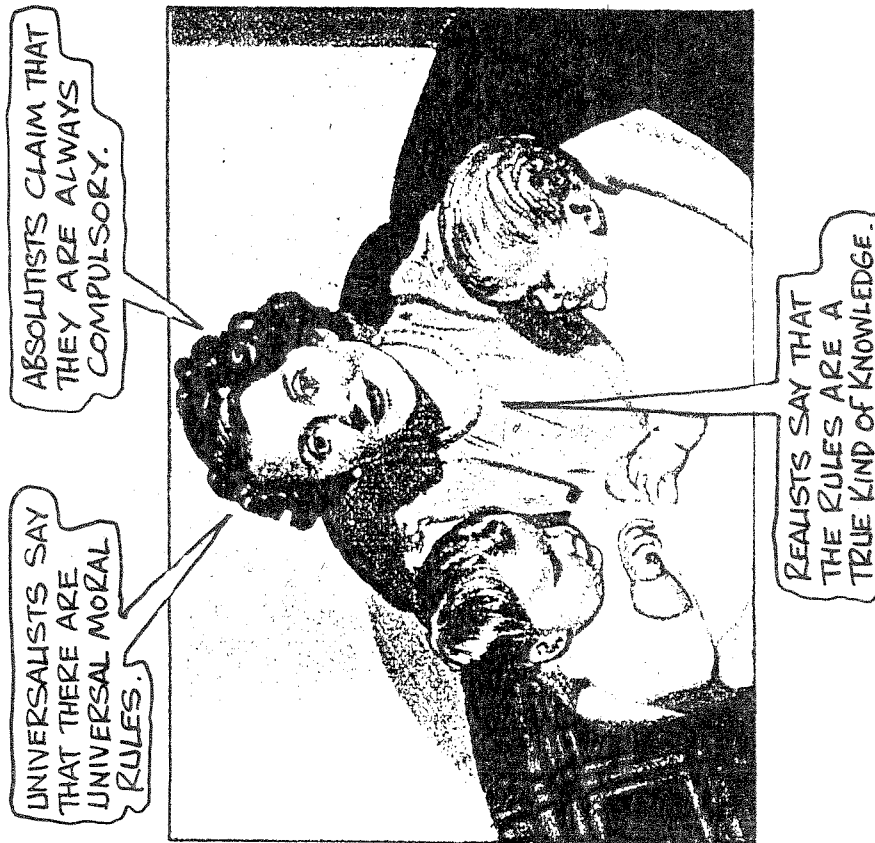


Nowadays there are very different sets of moral beliefs held by feminists and religious fundamentalists about abortion.



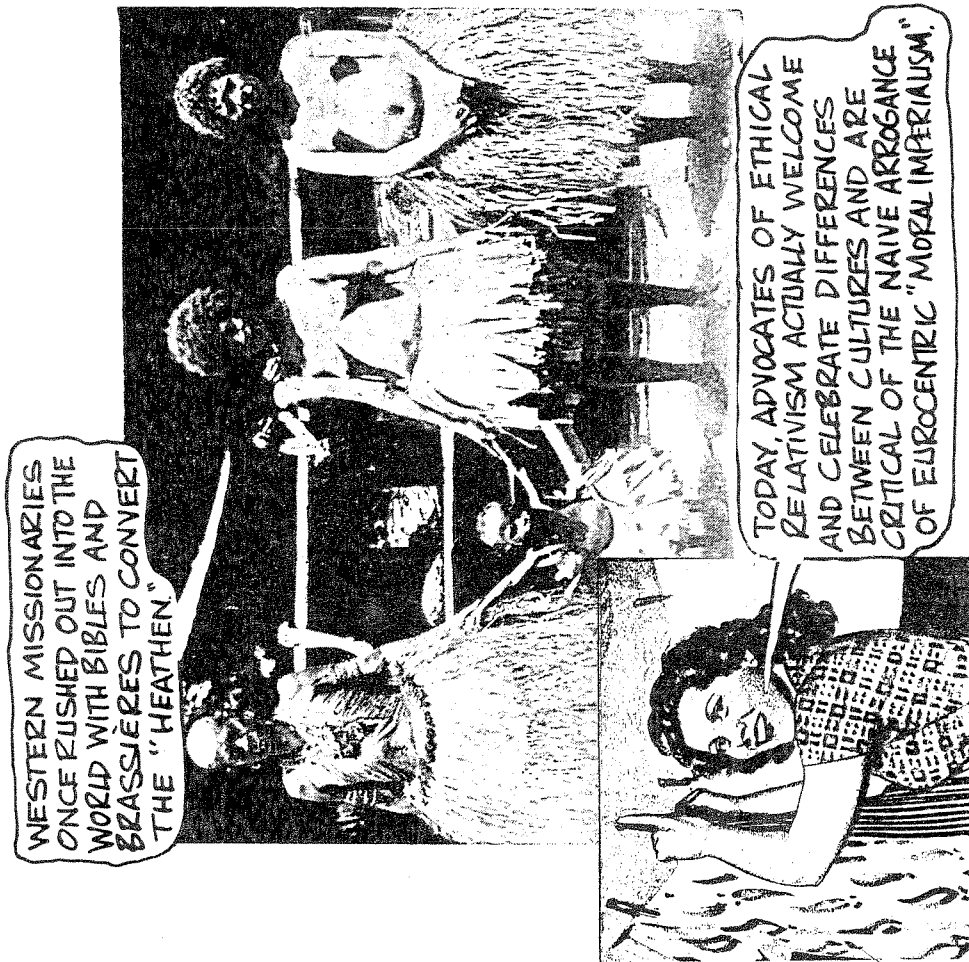
Ethical Absolutism

If there are all of these moral beliefs floating around, which one is right? How could we prove that one belief was right and others wrong? Most ethical relativists would say that there are no possible ways of deciding, and no such thing as moral "knowledge" at all. This kind of scepticism has worried other philosophers who think that there must surely be a set of universal moral rules that are always true. These philosophers are often called "**Universalists**", "**Realists**" or "**Absolutists**".



All three would say that it was always wrong to sacrifice babies, regardless of the beliefs of the culture that encouraged or allowed this practice.

The danger of **Ethical Absolutism** is that it can legitimize one powerful culture imposing its own local moral values on all others, by claiming a monopoly on the moral "truth".

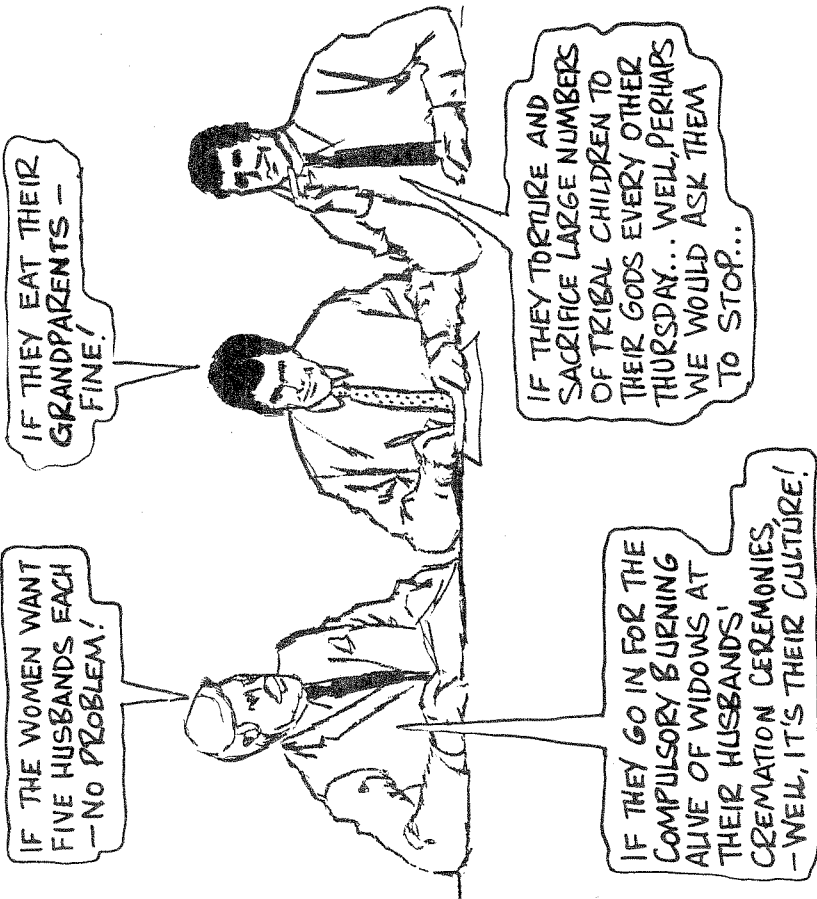


TODAY, ADVOCATES OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM ACTUALLY WELCOME AND CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CULTURES AND ARE CRITICAL OF THE NAIVE ARROGANCE OF EUROCENTRIC "MORAL IMPERIALISM."

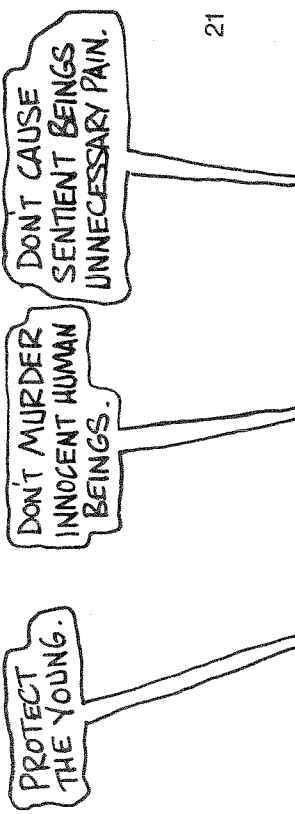
Westerners have also been witness to, and a cause of, the wholesale destruction of hundreds of unique cultures with their own ethical beliefs. Now we make some inadequate attempts to protect "innocent" and "primitive" tribal cultures and wring our hands in shame when we hear of their annihilation. We send out anthropologists and leave our Bibles and underwear at home.

Relativism versus Absolutism

Now most Western liberals and academics would not interfere with the moral beliefs and customs of other cultures.

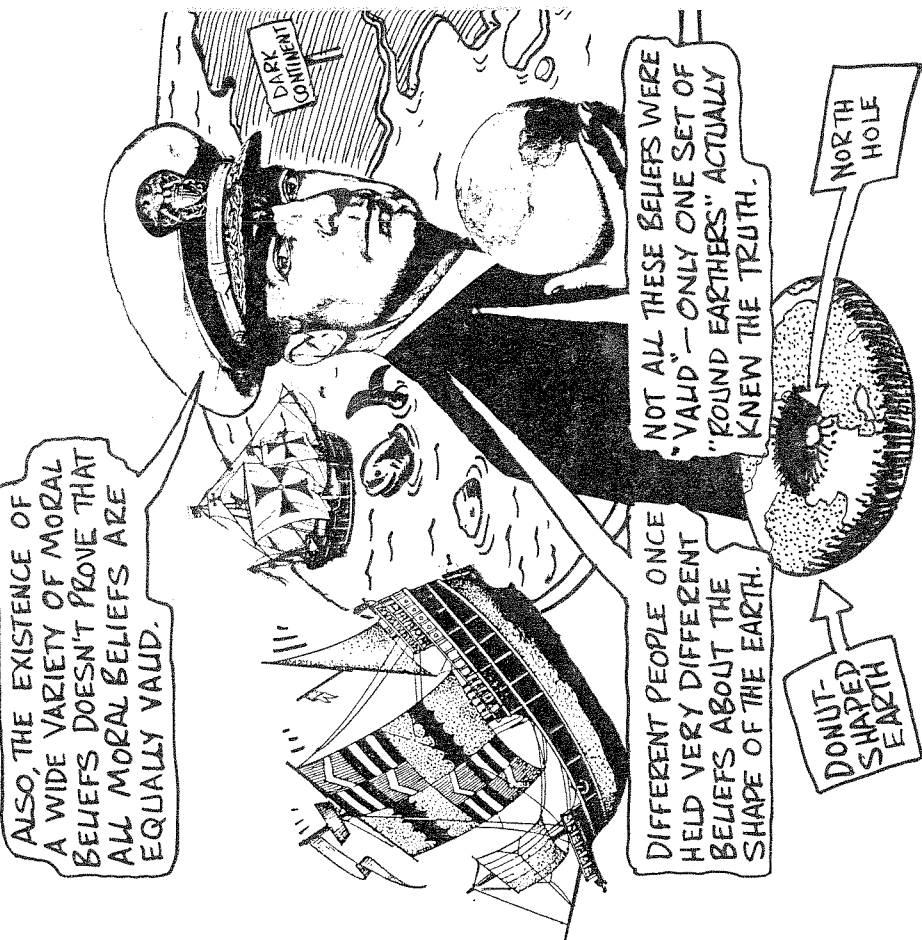


An ethical absolutist would then smile rather smugly and get us to admit that perhaps there are a few universal moral rules that are always true, wherever you are, like:



Another Absolutist Reply

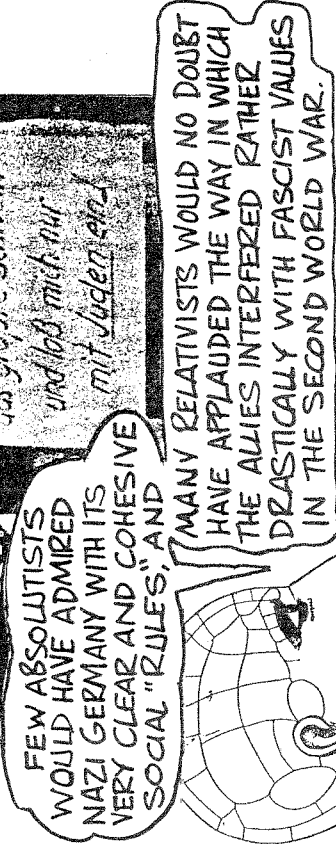
Some societies may look as if they go in for weird immoral behaviour, different from our own, but there seem to be a few fundamental core values like "Murder is wrong" that are always followed. A tribe may burn widows and sacrifice children in the belief that this is for the ultimate long-term heavenly good of the victims involved, but they don't sanction the murder of widows and children as such. Absolutists say that Relativists only look at what people do, not at what they actually believe.



Absolutists say that human morality is like this — there is real "moral knowledge". Some moral beliefs are "true" and some aren't, it's just that we haven't figured out how to prove which is which yet.

Are They Both Wrong?

Although the differences between Relativists and Absolutists are clear enough, they both face certain problems. Absolutists have to explain what the "core" moral rules are, and why they've selected the ones they have. Absolutists claim that the core moral rules are generally those "foundational" ones that enable societies to exist. But there can be problems with this definition of core values.



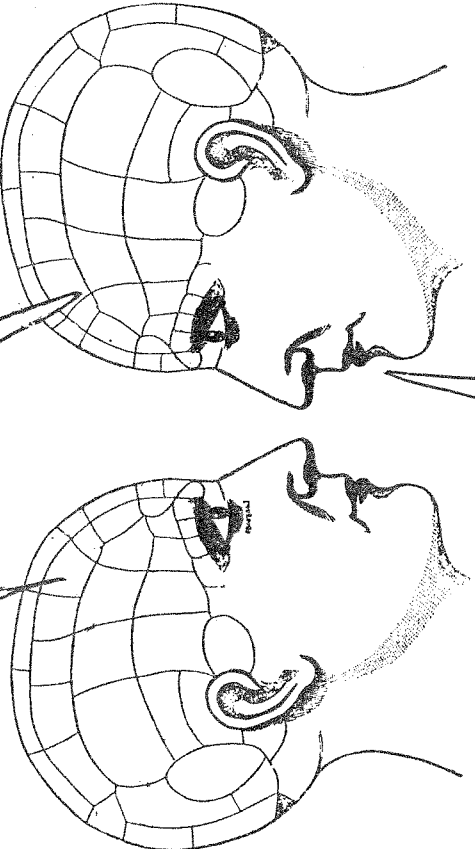
Yet most Relativists also believe in one absolute moral rule: "Don't interfere with other cultures".

The Problem of Moral Knowledge

The main difference between Relativists and Absolutists lies in their disagreement about the possibility of moral beliefs ever becoming true or proven. Relativists are often "subjectivists" who say that moral beliefs are really no more than subjective feelings about behaviour which can never achieve the status of facts.

THIS DOESN'T MAKE US MORAL NIHILISTS.

MOST OF US WOULD SAY THAT MORAL BELIEFS ARE VERY IMPORTANT, ARISING FROM VERY IMPRESSIVE HUMAN FEELINGS THAT WE HAVE ABOUT OURSELVES AND OTHERS....



...BUT WE CAN'T PROVE THEM IN THE WAY WE CAN PROVE "SCIENTIFIC" FACTS.

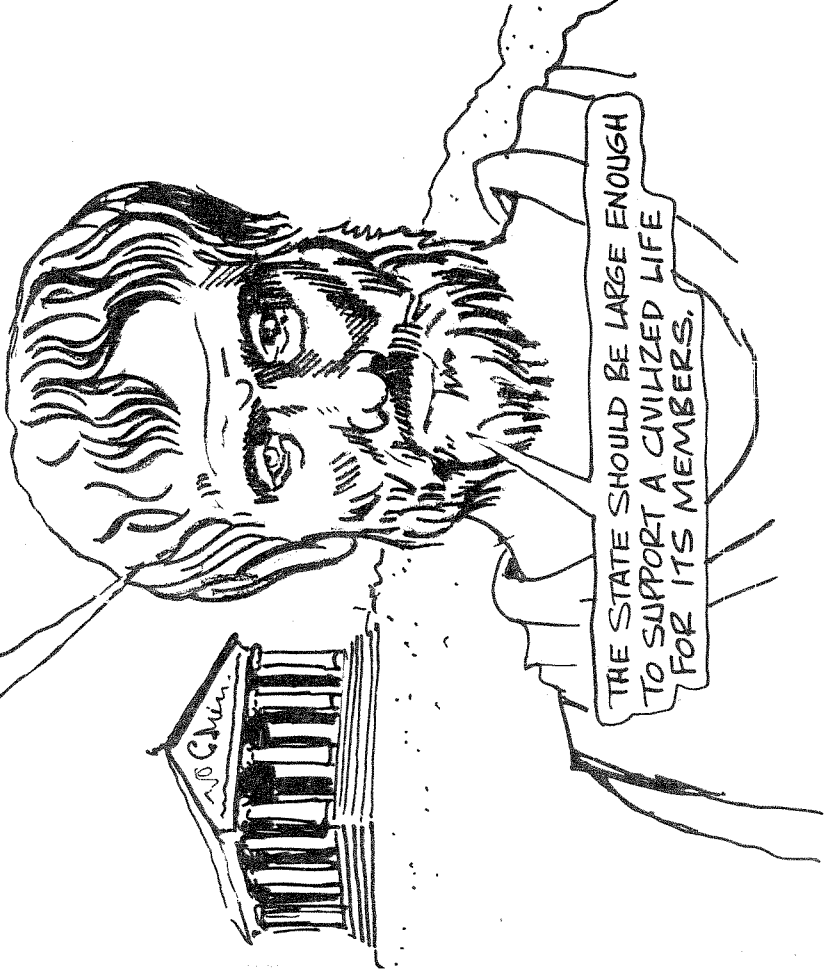
It is now time that we surveyed the history of ethical beliefs. We will limit ourselves to Western ideas, beginning with the Ancient Greeks, although many of the positions expressed could equally well be found in other non-Western cultures.

A Brief History of Ethics

The Greek City State

One of the most impressive examples of group living was the Greek City State or *Polis* of Athens in the 5th century B.C. This City State wasn't exactly tribal or like a modern State but something in between. City States were small and Athens was the most famous because sometimes it was "democratic". The Athens *Polis* was about the size of Dorset (1000 square miles) with a population of around 250,000.

WE THINK THAT SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL.



THE STATE SHOULD BE LARGE ENOUGH TO SUPPORT A CIVILIZED LIFE FOR ITS MEMBERS.

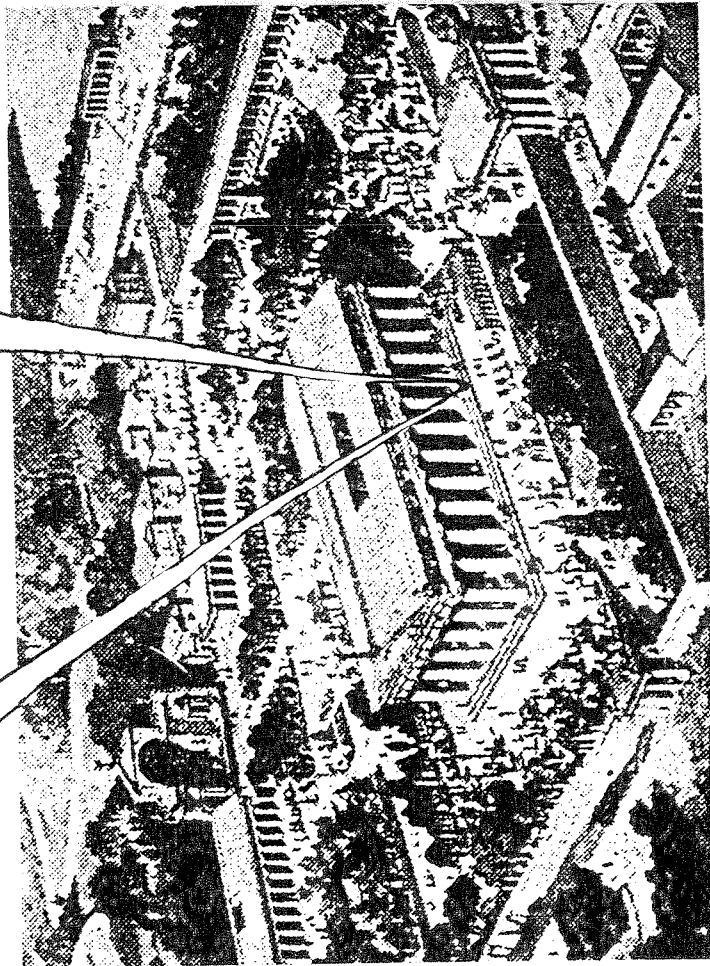
Aristotle would have been horrified by modern states in which vast populations have almost no say in how things are run.

Democracy

Only adult males over eighteen could become Athenian citizens, and being one was a very serious business which involved duties as well as privileges. Athens ran its affairs by calling an Assembly which met regularly to pass laws and decide upon government policy. The Athenians realized how important it was to be ruled by law and not by the arbitrary whims of kings or priests. It's hard for us modern "citizens" to get our heads around what this actually means.

NO POLITICAL PARTIES,
NO CIVIL SERVICE,
NO M.P.S....

... WHOEVER SHOWS UP TO AN
ASSEMBLY MEETING WILL BE
THE "DEMOS," AND GOVERNMENT
FOR THAT DAY.



Greeks and Philosophy

The Greeks were not only inventors of democracy, theatre, pure mathematics and much else, but also of a new kind of thinking, now called "philosophical".

THINKING PHILOSOPHICALLY IS
A REFUSAL TO TAKE TRADITIONAL
ANSWERS FOR GRANTED.



WE STARTED THINKING IN
THIS ODD AND IMPRACTICAL
WAY BECAUSE OF LIFE IN
THE GREEK CITY STATE.

FOR INSTANCE, OUR GODS
ARE RIDICULOUSLY
ANTHROPOMORPHIC...
NOT ONLY HUMAN-SHAPED
BUT BEHAVING WORSE
THAN HUMANS.

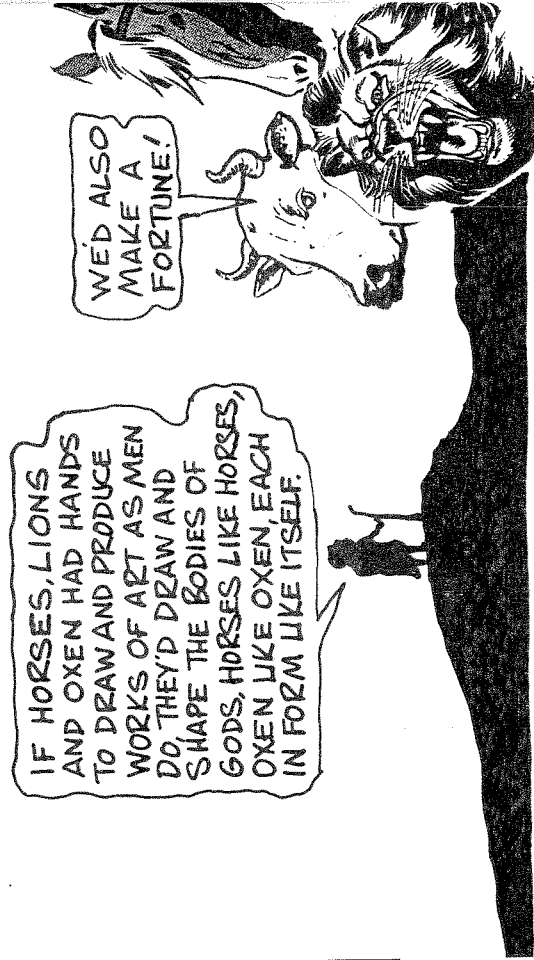
Athens wasn't Utopian. Women and slaves had no political say and, as is usually the case, the rich and powerful still got to be policy-makers and had more influence than ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, Athenians invented some astounding ideas — like the right to vote and have a fair trial.

Their gods were immortal, violent, randy and politically incorrect. They often recommended that their mortal subjects went to war. They fell in and out of love and quarrelled with each other all the time. They seduced and impregnated human mortals, often in very peculiar costumes and circumstances.

For thinkers like Socrates, the Gods must have been exceedingly inadequate as moral role models. There were no "Ten Commandments" to follow from Greek mythology. So, although most Greek intellectuals like Socrates paid lip service to the usual religious ceremonies and rituals required of them, they didn't take religion very seriously. Some philosophers, like the Sophist **Protagoras** (c. 490-420 B.C.) said about the Gods:



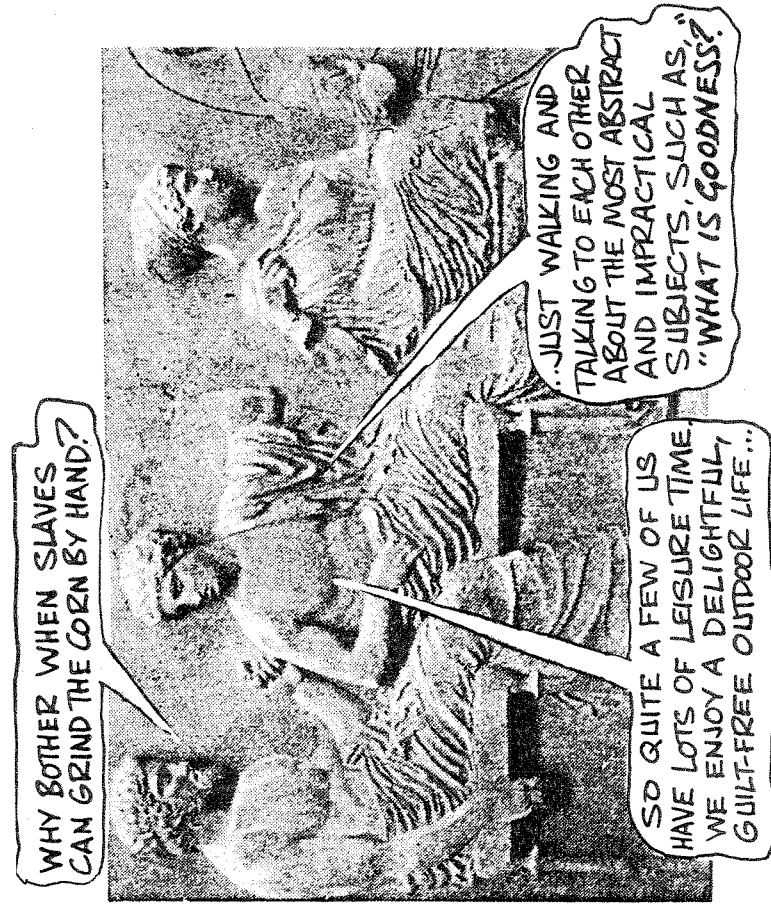
And **Xenophanes** (c. 570-475 B.C.) said:



This means that ethics had to be sought for outside of religion.

Slavery

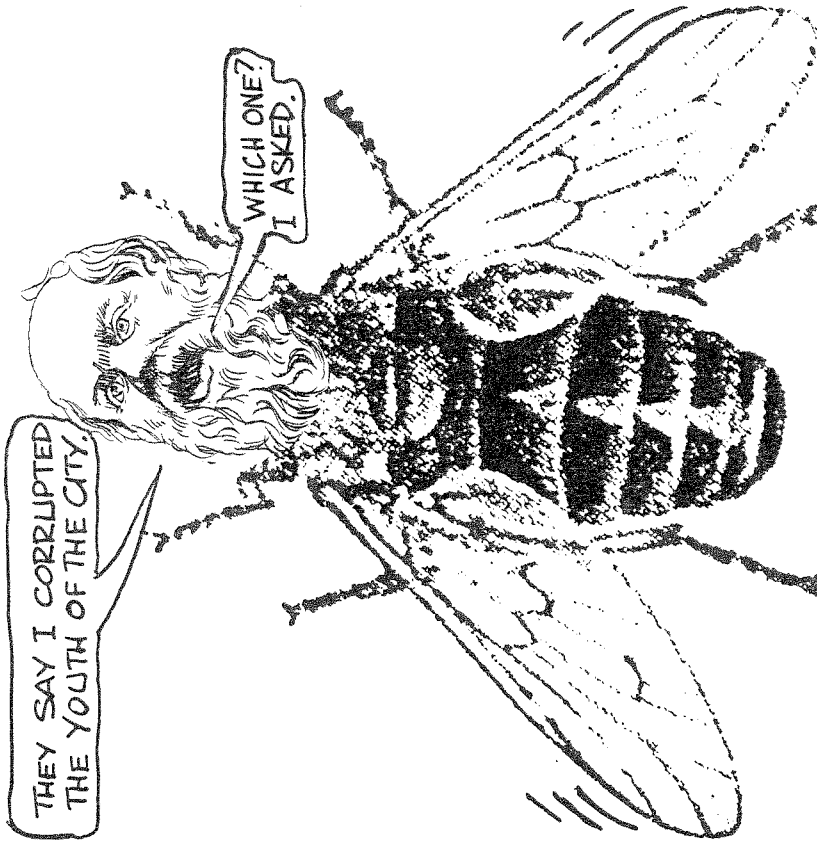
Although many Athenians had to work hard, higher-class Athenian men did no work at all. There were probably about 80,000 slaves in Athens – some working in appalling conditions in the silver mines, many employed as domestics. Greek philosophers owned slaves. Plato mentions five in his will and Aristotle seems to have had about fourteen. The institution of slavery never seems to have worried these moral philosophers at all. Aristotle seems to have sincerely believed that some people are slaves "by nature". The institution of slavery also meant that Greek technology was very primitive. No one, for example, thought of transferring the simple technology of the sailing boat to the windmill...



Philosophy was a communal activity, not a solitary pursuit. This is why Plato actually distrusted the new invention of books – they are closed systems of one individual and can never be corrected.

The Socratic Method

Socrates (c. 469-399 B.C.) was a stonemason's son and fat, bow-legged, bald, snub-nosed and scruffy. His nickname was "the Gadfly" because he would sting people into thinking clearly for themselves. He was condemned to death in 399 B.C. by the democratic government of Athens because he refused to recognize the Gods.



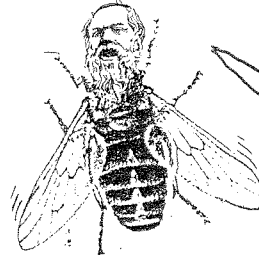
He was never dogmatic or authoritarian, but for many young people he seems to have been some sort of guru.

Socrates believed that the most important thing about human beings is that they ask questions. He also said that real moral knowledge existed and was worth pursuing for its own sake.

According to Socrates, "the unexamined life is not worth living". It's a disturbing idea. Questions about one's moral life are avoided by most adults – they prefer to earn money and live lives of undisturbed routine. The Gadfly encouraged young people to think for themselves and question all the usual adult moral rules. Socrates didn't want to be a guru handing down "wisdom".

REAL KNOWLEDGE COMES FROM DISCUSSION AND ARGUMENT, AND DISCOVERING IT IS A COOPERATIVE VENTURE.

He usually began by puzzling people with questions like "What is Right Behaviour?", or "What is a State?", subsequently revealing how little people knew about either morality or politics. He always stressed that the wise man is "he who knows that he knows nothing". Socrates perfected a method of enquiry that philosophers are now rather proud of.



YOU ASK QUESTIONS FIRST, TO FIND OUT CLEARLY WHAT IS ACTUALLY BEING ASKED AND THEN YOU ASK WHAT SORT OF ANSWERS ARE ACCEPTABLE.

Socratic Ethics: Know Thyself

Socrates had some moral beliefs. Like most Greeks, he thought that human beings are like manufactured objects in that they have a purpose or function (sometimes called the **teleological** view). We are pre-programmed with "software" and it is our job to discover what the codes are and carry them out correctly.

CAN WE SAY THAT THE PURPOSE OR PROGRAMME OF OUR LIFE IS TO FIND HAPPINESS IN THE FORMS OF WEALTH, FAME OR WISDOM?

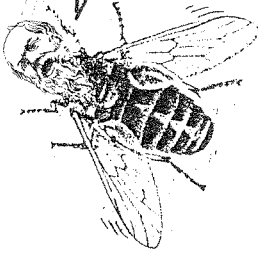


NO. WE HAVE A "REAL SELF" INSIDE US THAT WE CAN DISCOVER FOR OURSELVES. REAL HAPPINESS LIES IN ACHIEVING PERFECTION OF THIS REAL SELF, OR "SOUL".

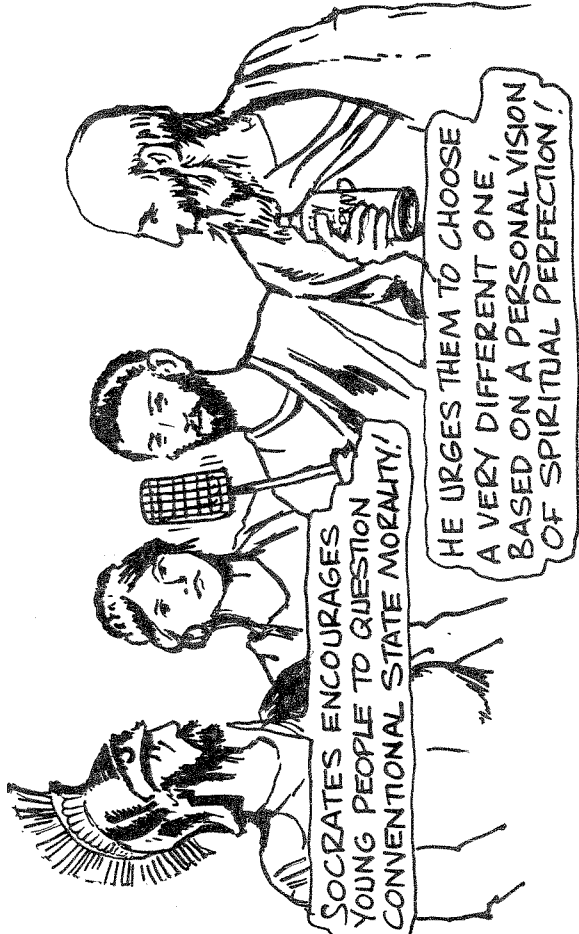
Morality isn't just obeying the law, but something much more spiritual. Once we know who we are, we will always know how to behave well.

Although moral knowledge is reachable through debate and discussion, Socrates stresses that morality is not the sort of knowledge that you can actually be taught. Real knowledge is about "essences" of things, like "Right Behaviour" or "Justice", that ultimately you have to discover for yourself.

ONCE YOU HAVE THIS KNOWLEDGE AND YOUR "INNER EYE" CAN SEE IT ALL CLEARLY, THEN YOU WILL ALWAYS KNOW WHAT IS RIGHT, AND AS A RESULT YOU WILL NEVER BE WICKED.



This is what Socrates means by phrases like "Virtue is knowledge" and "No one does wrong knowingly". The Athenian Democrats thought this was dangerous stuff.



SOCRATES ENCOURAGES YOUNG PEOPLE TO QUESTION CONVENTIONAL STATE MORALITY!

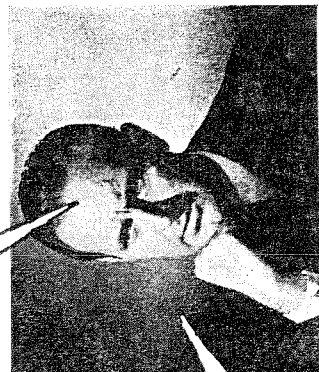
HE URGES THEM TO CHOOSE A VERY DIFFERENT ONE, BASED ON A PERSONAL VISION OF SPIRITUAL PERFECTION!

Socrates certainly got moral philosophy started, but he caused many subsequent philosophers a lot of headaches.

IS DISCUSSION AND ARGUMENT ALWAYS THE BEST WAY TO FIND OUT KNOWLEDGE?



ARE THERE SUCH THINGS AS THE "ESSENCES"?



DO WE HAVE A "REAL" INNER "SELF" OR "FUNCTION" AND HOW WOULD WE KNOW WHEN WE HAD DISCOVERED IT?



IS MORALITY A KIND OF KNOWLEDGE LIKE GEOGRAPHY OR IS IT MORE LIKE MATHEMATICS?

IS IT A KIND OF KNOWLEDGE AT ALL?

HAS ANYONE GOT AN ASPIRIN?

Socrates tends to envisage morality as a kind of self-discovery, but isn't morality more about our relationships with other people and taking responsibility for our actions? Once we know what is right, we will never do wrong, says Socrates. But what about all those people who know what they are doing is wrong but still choose to do wrong? What about people who are just too weak-willed or wicked to do the right thing? Don't you have to **choose** to do the right thing as well as **know** what it is?

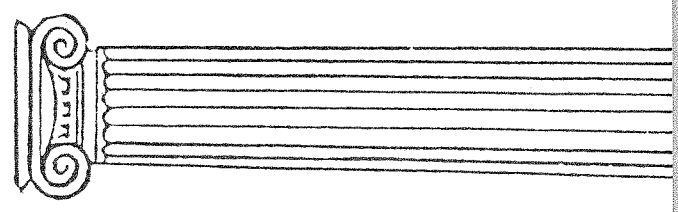
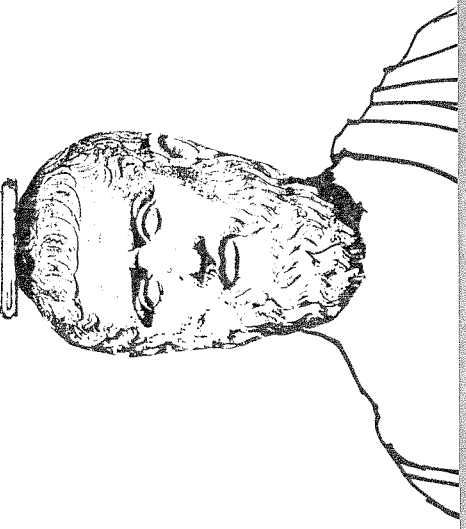
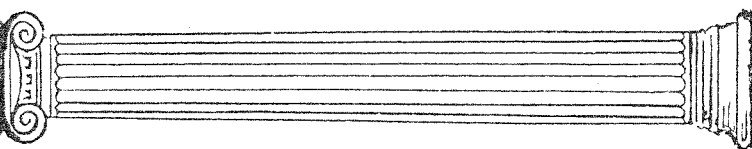
Plato's Republic

Socrates' most famous student was a young aristocrat called **Plato** (c. 428-354 B.C.) who never forgave the Athenian Democrats for murdering his teacher. Democracy for Plato meant chaos and rule by a violent and ignorant mob easily swayed by corrupt politicians. He left Athens in disgust, but later returned to find his City State in deep trouble.

Athens had been defeated by Sparta in 405 B.C. The citizens were disoriented and Sophist philosophers like **Thrasymachus** were spreading rumours that there was no such thing as morality. Plato's great work **The Republic** is an extraordinary book because it raises nearly every philosophical question there is.

A.N. Whitehead once said that all of Western philosophy is really no more than "footnotes" to Plato.

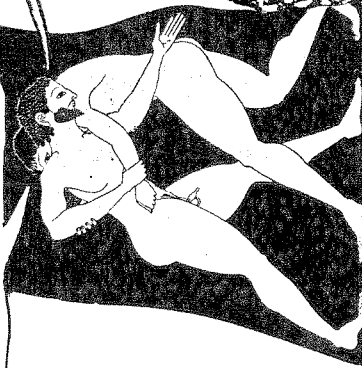
WESTERN PHILOSOPHY



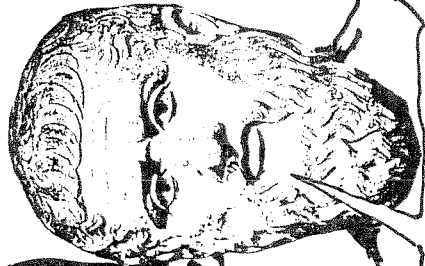
Plato versus the Sophists

Plato raises moral and political questions about the State itself – why being a citizen is as inevitable as breathing, why it demands loyalty, why we have to obey its laws, and why it is a good thing. **The Republic** begins with Socratic open dialogue – several Sophists are allowed to put forward their views about law and morality.

MORALITY IS MERELY A SET OF RULES INVENTED BY THE POWERFUL TO SUBJUGATE THE WEAK.



MORALITY IS JUST A SOCIAL CONTRACT.



THERE'S A PLACE SOMEWHERE ...

However, Plato ignores them all and lays down his doctrines about the individual, the state, and morality.

Plato is a "Two Worlder". He believes both in the existence of this sordid material world and in a purer, better one as well. What Plato says about our knowledge of both of these worlds accords with what he believes about morality and politics. This probably convinced him that he was right about everything, when he most certainly wasn't. Plato says there are two kinds of knowledge: **empirical** knowledge (that we obtain through our **senses**) and a vastly superior sort of knowledge that we get by using our **reason**. This second kind is permanent and eternal.

Virtually everyone can get access to empirical knowledge because most of us have five working senses. Only a very few experts can ever discover "real" knowledge, because you need very specially developed ability and training to "see" it mentally. Plato is a **Rationalist** – a philosopher who believes that real knowledge has to come from reason.

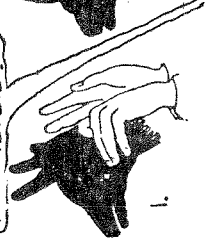
THE PHYSICAL WORLD THAT WE EXPERIENCE EVERY DAY IS ONE OF "HALF-REAL" SHADOWS: KNOWLEDGE OF THIS WORLD IS JUST THIRD RATE "OPINION."



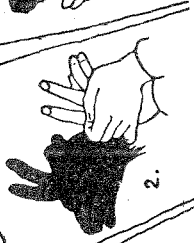
One source of this belief is mathematics. All Greek intellectuals were stunned by the beauty, permanence and purity of mathematics.

Numbers do not exist in the real world but somehow both in your head and in some other abstract, perhaps spiritual, place. Plato thought all knowledge could be as permanent and unchanging as mathematics.

DID YOU KNOW THE SQUARE ROOT OF 7 IS 2.6457513?



THAT'S BEAUTIFUL, MAN!



FAR OUT!

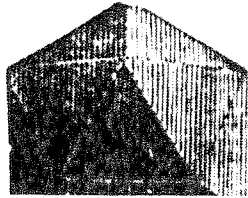


?

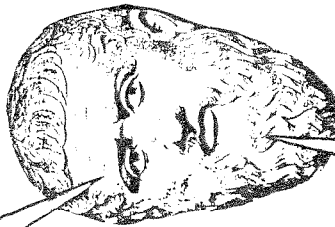
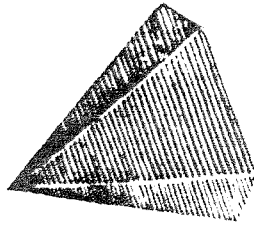
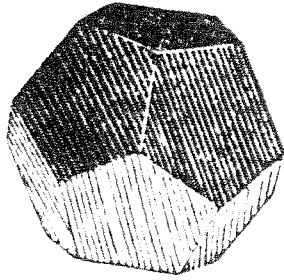


The World of Forms

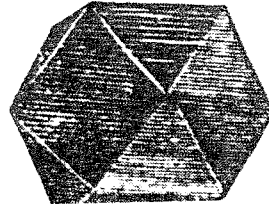
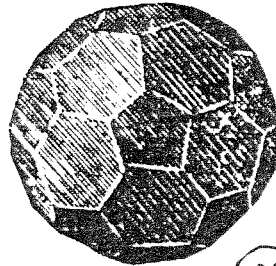
Plato says that the everyday world of the senses is surpassed by an extraordinary and incredible world of "Forms". The Forms are permanent, timeless and "real". The Forms explain how we know a red apple when we see one - because it shares the Forms of "Apple" and "Red". The Forms in this perfect world are of everything from "The Perfect Chair" to "Beauty", "Goodness" and "The Perfect State".



MORALITY IS NOT A HUMAN CONVENTION BUT A PART OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE UNIVERSE ITSELF!



SO THE FORMS ARE THE TRUE AND INFALLIBLE SOURCE OF ALL HUMAN IDEALS.

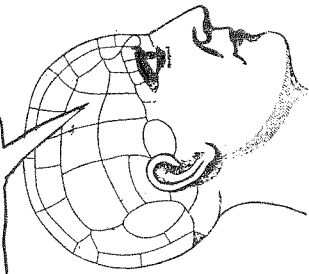


The political conclusion to all this is that perfect infallible knowledge is something that only a few individual specialists can ever possess. Plato says that these specialists must be put in charge of everybody else. The "Guardians" will always know the correct answers to any problem and know what to do.

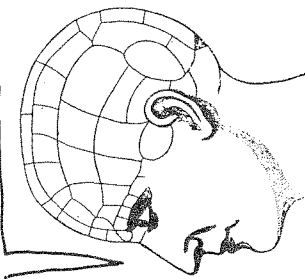
A Closed Society

Plato was a moral absolutist who thought that moral knowledge was "coded" in the universe, as some mathematicians think that numbers are coded. But are there moral "facts", like facts about giraffes or triangles? Ethical absolutism like this assumes a bureaucratic model of what morality should be like - a special knowledge known only by experts.

WE HAVE TO ASK WHAT TO DO.



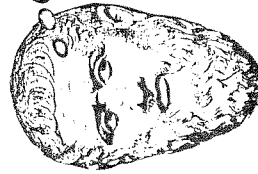
THERE ARE NO RULES LAID DOWN.



Plato assumes that the morality of the individual and the morality of the State are the same thing. This could lead to immoral repressive tyrannies ruled by self-declared "élites" who judge individuals solely on how well they contribute to the State. Many people in this century have had very unpleasant experiences of closed societies ruled by self-perpetuating élites in charge of centralized monolithic truths.



PLATO HAS FORGOTTEN THAT ARGUMENT AND DEBATE, AND LOTS OF DIFFERENT POLITICAL VIEWS, ARE GOOD THINGS IN THEMSELVES!



Aristotle and Commonsense Ethics

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) was Plato's student and came from northern Greece. Aristotle became the tutor of Alexander the Great (also from the north) and eventually founded his own university – the Lyceum. He agreed with Plato that humans are essentially social beings, best organized in City States. But as far as morality is concerned, Aristotle is more pragmatic.



ETHICS IS A ROUGH 'N' READY SORT OF BUSINESS THAT HAS TO BE DETERMINED BY ORDINARY PRACTICAL MEN OF COMMON SENSE, NOT BY INBRED ASCETIC "EXPERTS" WITH THEIR HEADS IN THE REMOTE AND AUSTERE WORLD OF "FORMS."

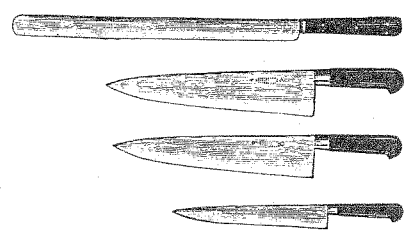
OLYCEUM
 PHILOSOPHY + SCIENCES + BALLROOM DANCING
 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ DRESS: SMART-CASUAL ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Aristotle is more interested in what ordinary people think about morality on a day-to-day basis.

The Teleological View and the "Mean"

In **The Nichomachean Ethics**, Aristotle stresses that he is not interested in remote abstractions, like "Goodness itself", but in ordinary everyday goodness that most people choose most of the time. The driving force behind virtually all of Aristotle's philosophy is the belief that the ultimate meaning of all things can be understood from an examination of their different ends.

EVERYTHING IS HEADING TOWARDS ITS OWN UNIQUE PERFECT DESTINY. JUST AS A KNIFE FULFILLS ITS PURPOSE BY CUTTING WELL, HUMAN BEINGS ARE FULFILLED AND HAPPY WHEN THEY'RE FUNCTIONING WELL.



It's as if we are already programmed with the "moral software" of justice, fairness, temperance, courage and so on, but it's up to us to realize its full potential. Sensible people do this by choosing a "mean" between extremes. As good humans, we should try to be reasonably courageous, but not ridiculously reckless or absurdly timid. Aristotle is also quite clear about moral responsibility – if you choose to do something wrong, then you should be punished for it.

A Dull but Good Person

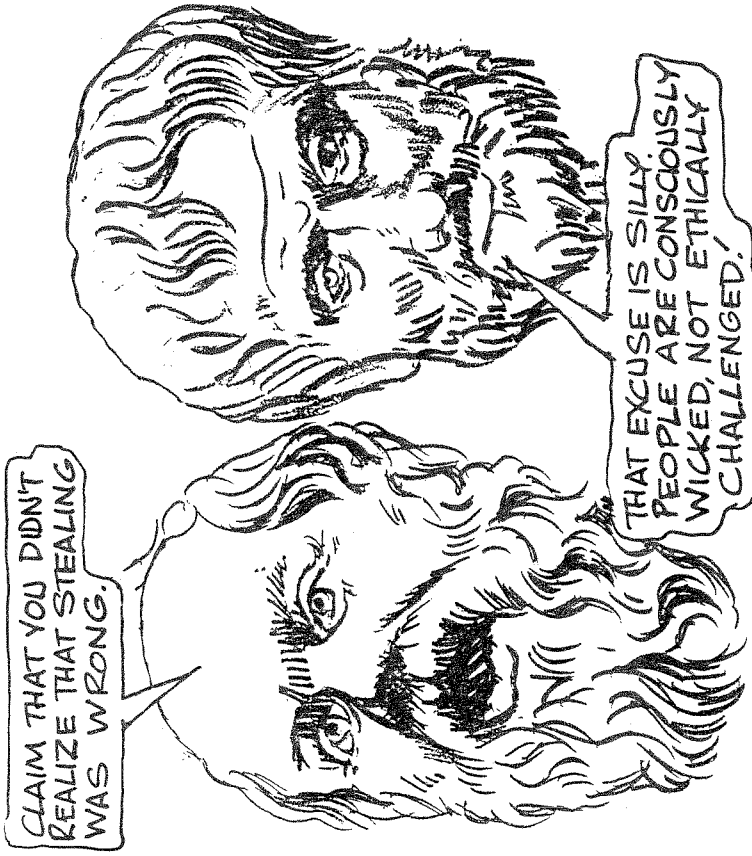
Aristotle's ideal is essentially a dull middle-aged sensible Athenian male citizen who is calm and rational, avoids extremes, and knows how to behave from experience. If we can be like this, he thinks, then we will be psychologically content. We become moral by working at it, just as we learn to play the piano by practising.



We gradually learn to choose a "mean" which is right for us and each morally problematic situation. When the time comes for us to decide whether to give just some or all of our money away to charity, we will know what to do. And when we have this kind of confidence in ourselves and our moral judgement, we'll be happy because we will have fulfilled our destiny.



Aristotle's views on moral responsibility seem sensible enough and have been very influential in law. When you choose to steal and you get caught, then you have to take the blame. It's as simple and obvious as that. If you have been compelled to take it by threats of violence, or you took it by mistake, then you're off the hook. But what Aristotle won't allow you to do is what Socrates thought you could do.



Aristotle's views seem strange because nowadays we don't confuse morality with self-fulfilment. And are we "programmed" with certain dispositions in the way that Aristotle thinks we are? In a post-Romantic age that celebrates individualism and personal choice, many of us would also reject the idea that "good citizenship" is the ideal to aim for.

Most of Aristotle's moral doctrine also seems very dull – as careful compromise usually is. The doctrine of the Mean may make some kind of sense where courage is concerned.

BUT HOW DO YOU CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE "MEAN" FOR TELLING THE TRUTH OR COMMITTING ADULTERY?

YOU EITHER DO OR YOU DON'T... AN AFFABLE COMPROMISE DOESN'T SEEM POSSIBLE.



Aristotle may provide us with guidance on how to be fulfilled, but we don't get any moral rules to help us see how we should relate to others. But he may be right to suggest that morality is a very approximate "science" or skill – more like learning to drive a car than studying physics.



LEARNING TO DRIVE A CAR? IS THAT HOW YOU SEE OUR RELATIONSHIP?

Many modern moral philosophers now think that there is a great deal in what he says, of which more later.

Hellenistic Ethics

The influence of Greek thought on moral philosophy was profound, and lasted long after the City States collapsed and were exchanged for the new military empires of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) and then Rome. Greek moral philosophy survived in various forms in Macedonia, Syria and Egypt, and from about 50 B.C. throughout the whole Roman Empire. "Hellenistic" moral philosophy is mostly a series of additions to Aristotle's views on human fulfillment and happiness.

The Cynics

The Cynics, founded by **Antisthenes** (c. 444-366 B.C.), claimed that happiness lay in cultivating an indifference to worldly ambition and possessions because the individual is never able to control these things for long. Their most colourful spokesman was **Diogenes** (d. 320 B.C.), who lived in a barrel and was rude to Alexander the Great.



Stoics and Epicureans

Both Stoics and Epicureans differ from Aristotle in one key respect: both suggest that the wise man avoids or ignores the corruption and compromise of political life. This is because they are no longer members of a democratic City State, but alienated individuals living under an impersonal and corrupt Empire.

The **Stoics**, founded by **Zeno of Citium** (c. 336-261 B.C.), believed in "Natural Law" – a doctrine that later became very important to Medieval Scholasticism. Their most famous disciples were Romans – among them the statesman and orator Cicero and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. The Stoical view on individual lives is fatalist.

WE ARE ALL GOVERNED BY NATURAL LAW AND WE MUST ACCEPT WHAT LIFE THROWS AT US WITH CALMNESS AND COURAGE.

THE WISE MAN THEREFORE LIMITS HIS WANTS TO CLEARLY ACHIEVABLE THINGS...



BUT LOVE IS BLIND AND LOVERS CANNOT SEE THE PRETTY FOLLIES THAT THEMSELVES COMMIT.

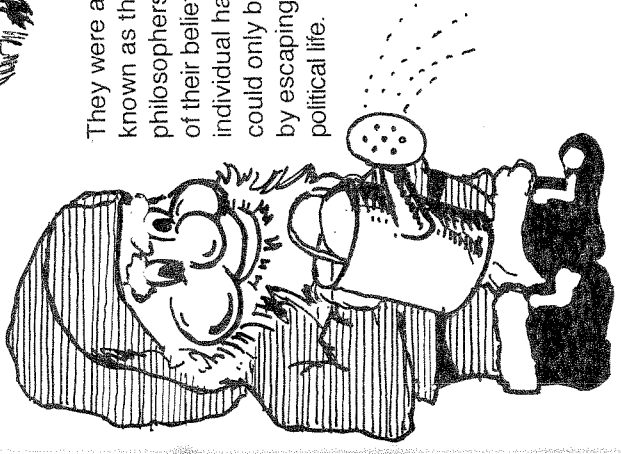
The Stoics thought human passions often made human beings disastrously irrational – a view of human nature that Shakespeare seems to have shared.

The **Epicureans**, founded by **Epicurus** (341-270 B.C.), equated happiness with pleasure, something Aristotle had always been careful to avoid. However, "pleasure" for Epicureans had to be pursued with Aristotelian moderation, and came in many forms: friendship and philosophical discussion, as well as wine and song. In fact, Epicureans were more Stoical than they sound.

WE BELIEVE THAT SELF-CONTROL AND SERENITY CAN HELP MOST PEOPLE ENDURE MOST THINGS.



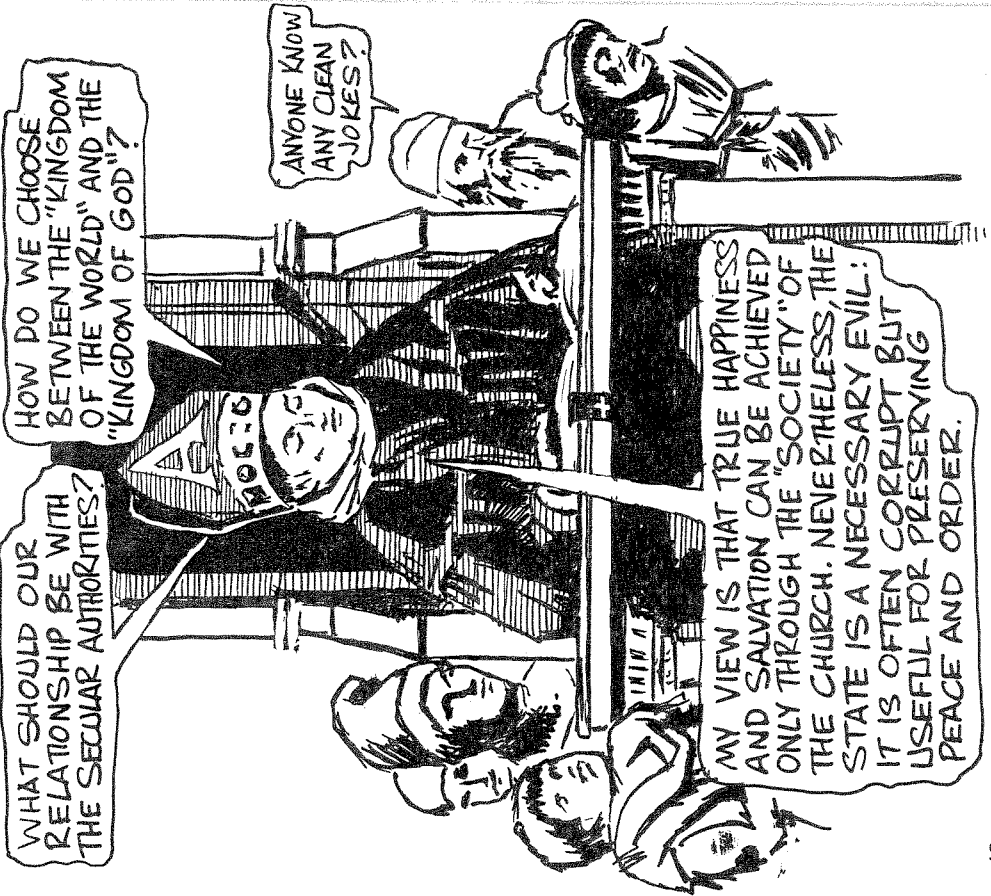
They were also sometimes known as the "garden philosophers" because of their belief that private individual happiness could only be achieved by escaping from public political life.



The Advent of Christianity

By the 4th century A.D., Christianity was the official religion of the whole of the Roman Empire. The Empire itself became two empires in A.D. 330 when Constantine moved the capital from Rome to Constantinople.

By A.D. 476 the western half had collapsed. In 529 the Church finally closed Plato's Academy in Athens and moral philosophy became a part of Christian theology, although the influence of Plato and Aristotle kept surfacing in the works of the Church fathers. **St. Augustine** (354-430) tried to harmonize the Gospel teachings and Plato's philosophy. He tackled a major problem for Christians.



Medieval and Scholastic Ethics

Virtually all medieval philosophers were churchmen who accepted that Christianity was true. This means that moral debate often centred on questions that seem to us now more theological and technical than "moral".



The teachings of Aristotle were assimilated by the greatest medieval theologian, **St. Thomas Aquinas** (1224-74).



Aquinas had more interesting things to say about society's laws and the individual. Laws, according to Aquinas, must be more than just a reflection of the personal whims of government. They are necessary for the common good of all and reflect "Natural Law" which is "impressed" on all of us by God. Secular law is admittedly useful because it ensures public order and makes social life possible.

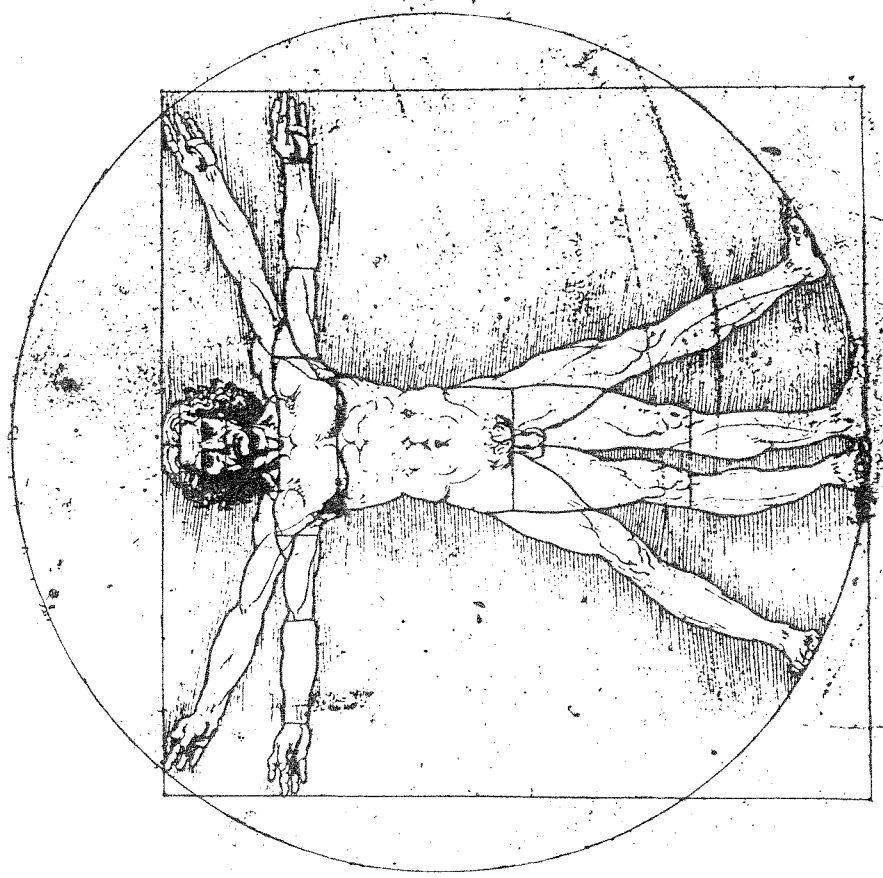
BUT SECULAR LAW ON ITS OWN CANNOT MAKE PEOPLE VIRTUOUS....

... IF IT IS NOT IN ACCORDANCE WITH NATURAL LAW, PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHT TO BREAK IT!



The Rise of Humanism

Eventually science and philosophy started to break away from the influence and teachings of the Church, just as Greek philosophy had questioned mythology and superstition two thousand years earlier. The **Renaissance** started in northern Italy in the 14th century and spread throughout Europe in the 15th and 16th.



Renaissance "**Humanism**" placed greater emphasis on human achievement and less on the role of God in human affairs. It also encouraged a greater stress on the usefulness and productivity of the empirical method in science. The **Reformation** hastened this whole process.

Machiavelli

The interest in the relationship between morality and the State continued during the Renaissance, and its most famous writer on this topic was **Niccolò Machiavelli**.

Machiavelli (1469-1527) was born in Florence, a City State like Athens, although governed somewhat differently. Machiavelli was a practical diplomat rather than a philosopher. His famous book is called **The Prince**, and was one of the first ever to be placed on the Catholic Church's Index of Forbidden Books.



Morality and Public Life

The **Prince** is ostensibly a technical book on politics but its subtext is definitely ethics. What Machiavelli points out is that all good rulers need *virtù* – the "masculine" qualities of self reliance, courage, resoluteness and so on. However, to be a really successful ruler also means going in for "necessary immorality". A prince must lie, betray, cheat, steal and kill. "It is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain his position to learn how not to be good..."

Machiavelli then describes some of the rather un-Christian ways in which Cesare Borgia operated: he didn't think it was always necessary to keep promises or tell the truth; he invited rebel soldiers to dinner and then had them strangled; he appointed a cruel deputy to enforce his own laws, whom he then executed.

Disagreements About the Book

Readers of Machiavelli's book have always argued over it. Some, like the Catholic Church, believed it to be a wicked book, others think it is a satire, others say it is not a moral or immoral book but a "technical" book. However, there's not much doubt that Machiavelli admired successful princes in spite of their methods. He was, like Hobbes, fairly pessimistic about human nature. He thought princes had to be immoral.



Machiavelli Today

The **Prince** is important, not because it offers any great philosophical insights into ethics, the individual and governments, but because of the way it has helped to establish a climate of opinion which suggests that there is inevitably a difference between private and public morality. (Sometimes associated in people's minds with "female" and "male" ethics, of which more later.) Many people today still believe that you have to be pragmatic and prudent or "unethical" in political life, business dealings and the public sphere generally. There have to be two sets of moral standards.



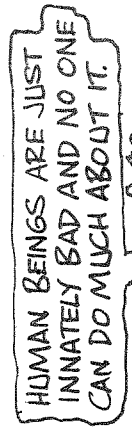
Machiavelli thought politics and morality were awkward companions.

Brutes or Innocents?

Machiavelli's influential "political science" launched a continuing debate about human nature and morality in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Are human beings brutes, tamed and dragged into becoming moral beings by society, or are they moral innocents corrupted by society? The debate is interesting because some of its conclusions about societies, individuals and the need for government are still relevant.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the 17th century English Royalist, philosopher and author of *Leviathan*, popularized the doctrine that says human nature is basically nasty. This account is often called "Psychological Egoism".

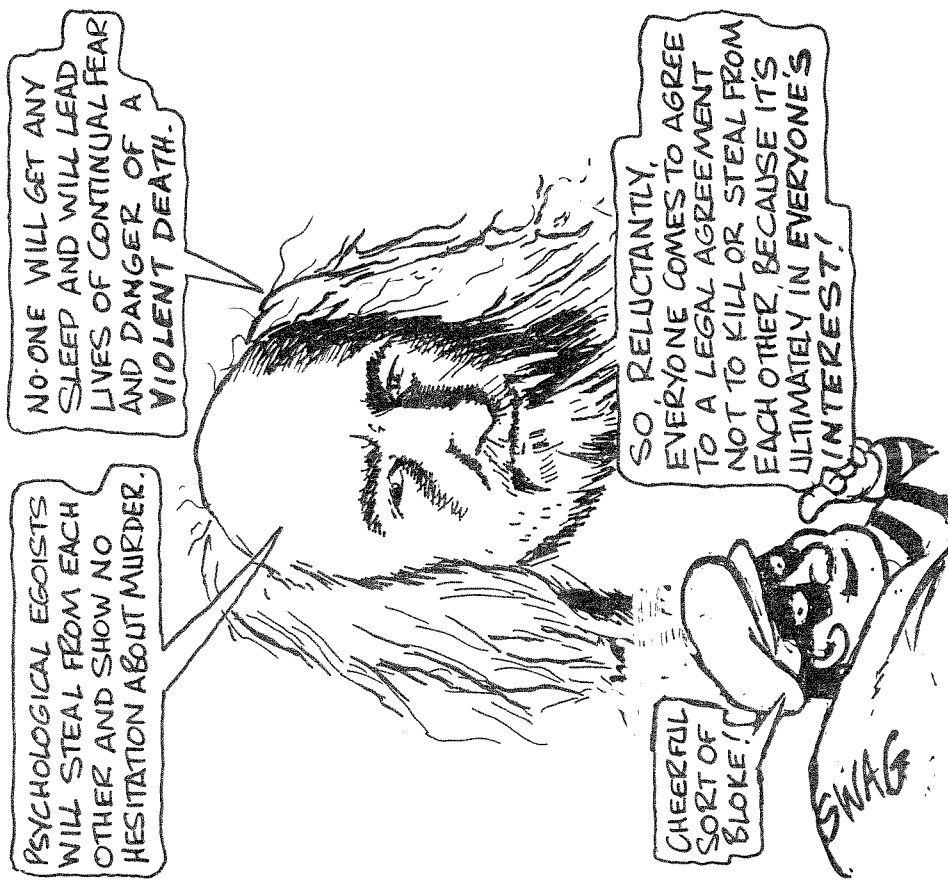


HUMAN BEINGS ARE JUST INNATELY BAD AND NO ONE CAN DO MUCH ABOUT IT.



The Social Contract

Hobbes' solution is a legalistic form of the reciprocity idea, usually called "The Social Contract". Hobbes thought that morality was simply a way for wicked but rational human beings to avoid conflict. When there is no society, then human beings live in a "state of nature" where everyone's life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short".



In order to make this "social contract" enforceable, they also make a further "Government Contract" with a neutral third party who agrees to enforce the first "Social" one. That's how societies get started and why strong and firm governments are a good idea – to save us from the results of our innate wickedness.

Is It True?

Hobbes' explanation about where morality comes from is not totally convincing. Lots of people behave very oddly for "psychological egoists" – they jump into frozen lakes to save drowning children and secretly give money to charities. Most of Hobbes' talk about a "state of nature" isn't very historical. There's little evidence for this "atomistic" theory about pre-societal murderers making "contracts".

Our nearest genetic relatives, the great apes, conduct their lives harmoniously and are a very gregarious bunch of mutual groomers. And it looks as if human beings have always been social animals living in families and tribes, not as isolated loners.



Romantic Innocence

The opposite doctrine to Hobbes' pessimistic one is sometimes known as the "Romantic" view, and really started with **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** (1712-78). Rousseau's view is that we are born as moral beings with a huge potential for goodness, and that is why children's education is so important.



This brought with it artificial needs like CD players and fast cars and corresponding vices like greed and sexual depravity. Although getting corrupted by civilized tastes sounds like fun, the result was that our innate goodness and innocence got corrupted. These are the views that Rousseau puts forward in **Discourse on the Arts and Sciences and Emile**.