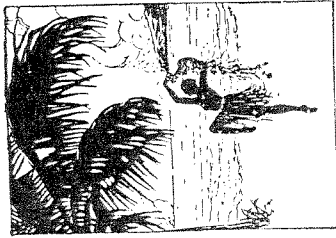
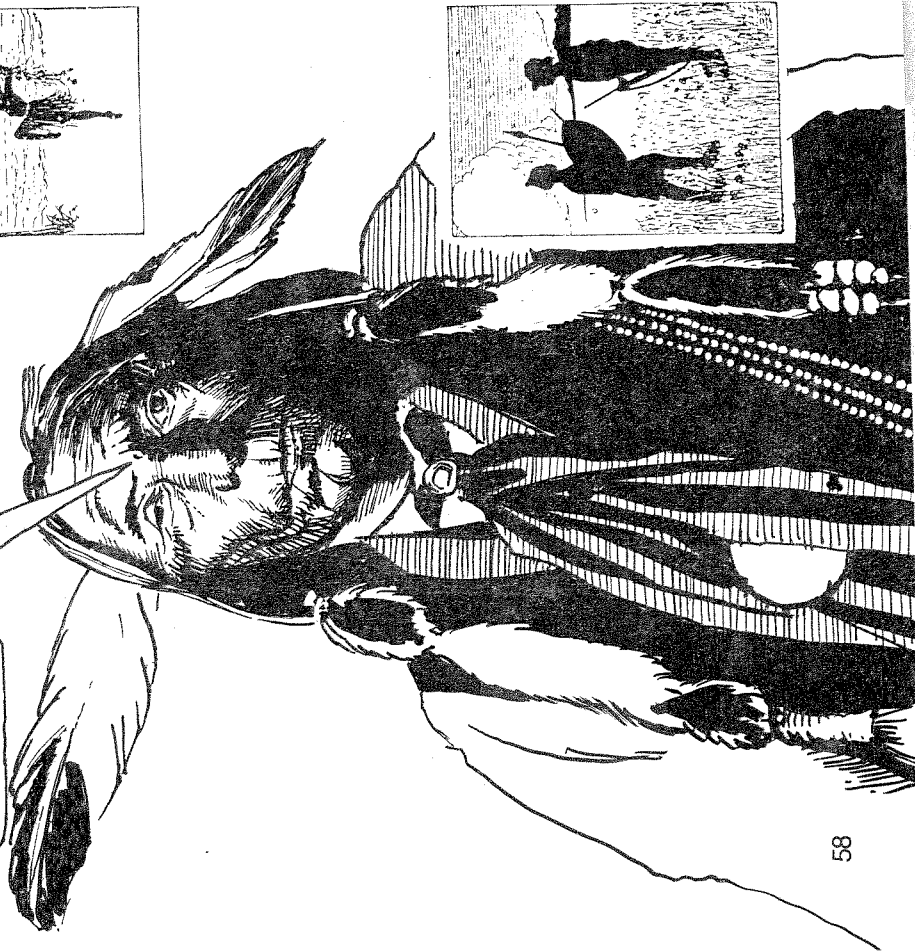


## The Noble Savage

Unlike Hobbes, Rousseau thought it possible to form a society that virtually dispensed with government through the expression of "the General Will" – a doctrine both vague and dangerous. Who is going to discover and then enforce this "Will" on people? Primalordial human innocence is also a doctrine about human nature which ultimately leads to the myth of the Noble Savage – the belief that "primitive" peoples, like native Americans, lead simpler, more fulfilling and morally superior lives to decadent Westerners. It's a myth.



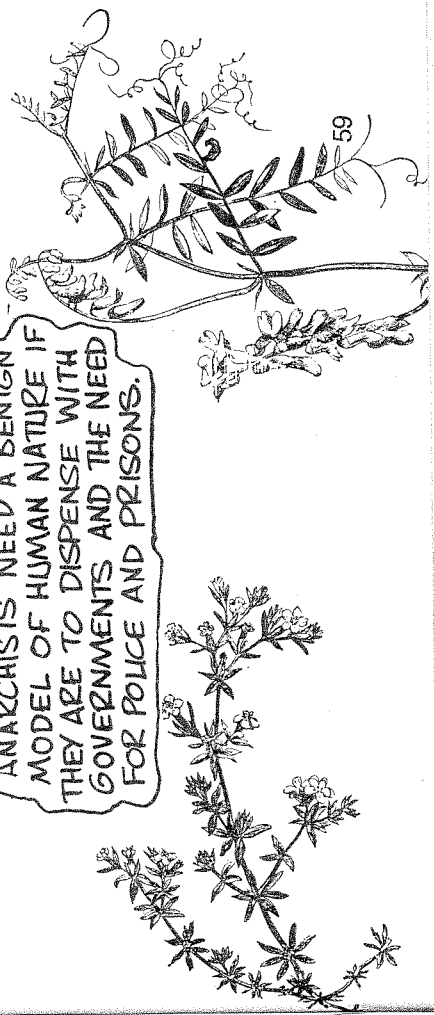
THERE IS NOTHING 'SIMPLE' OR ESSENTIALLY 'MORAL' ABOUT THE LIVES OF PEOPLES IN LESS TECHNOLOGICALLY DEVELOPED CULTURES.



"Noble savagery" is used to satirize the moral sins and perceived excesses of civilized society. To some extent, it led to the whole complicated "Romantic Movement" which often suggested that moral instruction best comes from trees, children and peasants rather than philosophers or politicians. In its earlier days, the Romantic Movement was also revolutionary and even anarchist in its sympathies.



ANARCHISTS NEED A BENIGN MODEL OF HUMAN NATURE IF THEY ARE TO DISPENSE WITH GOVERNMENTS AND THE NEED FOR POLICE AND PRISONS.



## Mutual Aiders or Sociobiology

**Peter Kropotkin** (1842-1921), the anarchist philosopher, and the more recent sociobiologist **Edward O. Wilson** (b. 1929), both believe something rather less radically polarized about human nature and morality.

MORALITY HAS MORE OR LESS EVOLVED OUT OF HUMAN NATURE, WITHOUT THE NEED FOR ANY LEGALISTIC FRAMEWORKS BASED ON A MUTUAL FEAR.

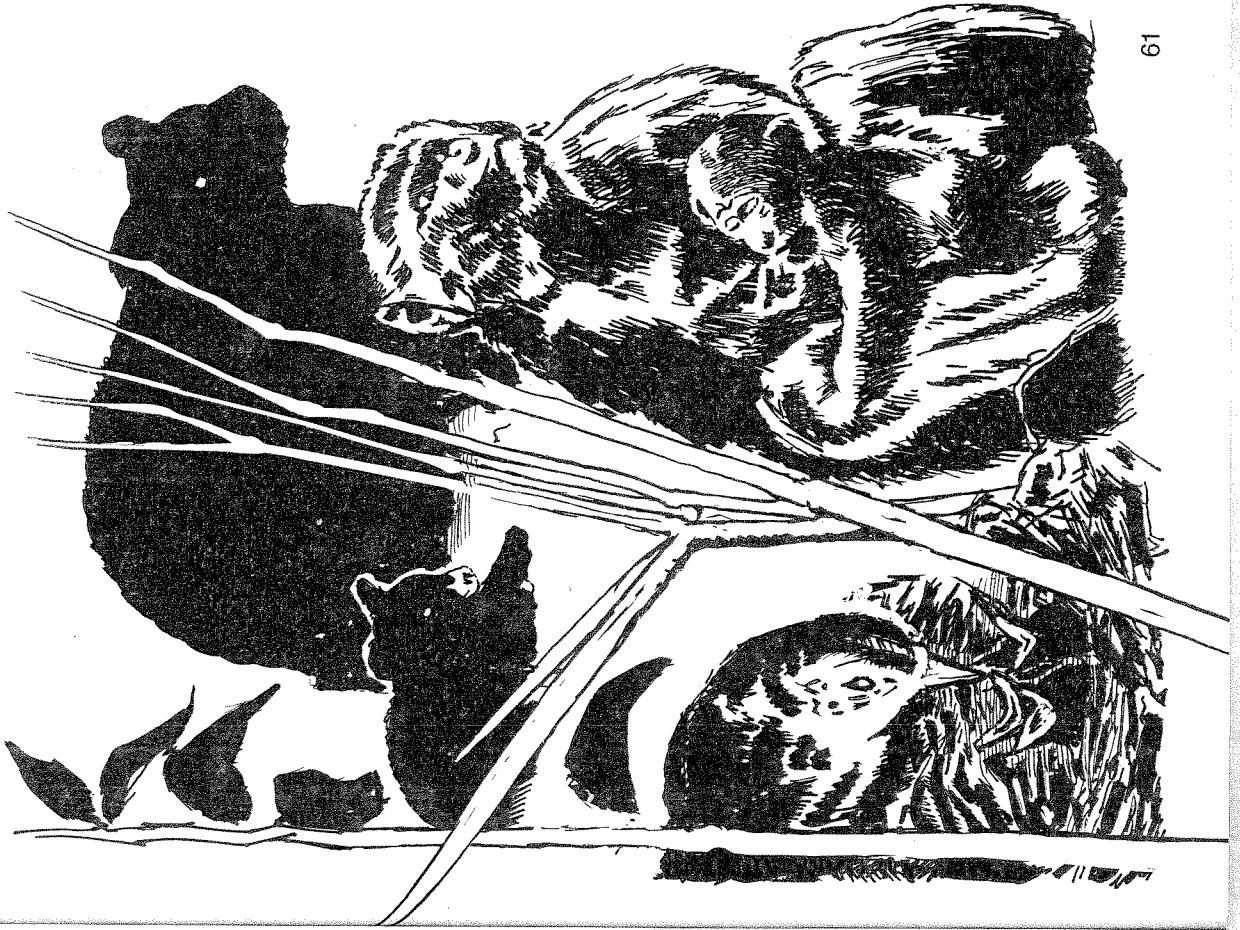


NOR IS MORALITY SOMETHING INNATE THAT HAS LONG SINCE BEEN ANNIHILATED BY CIVILIZATION.

Simply by looking around us, we can see that there is an impressive amount of evidence to show that human beings are neither motivated by violent greed, nor are they corrupted innocents. Large numbers of human beings do seem to possess very real motives of friendship, loyalty, compassion, generosity and sympathy, as well as those of greed and selfishness.

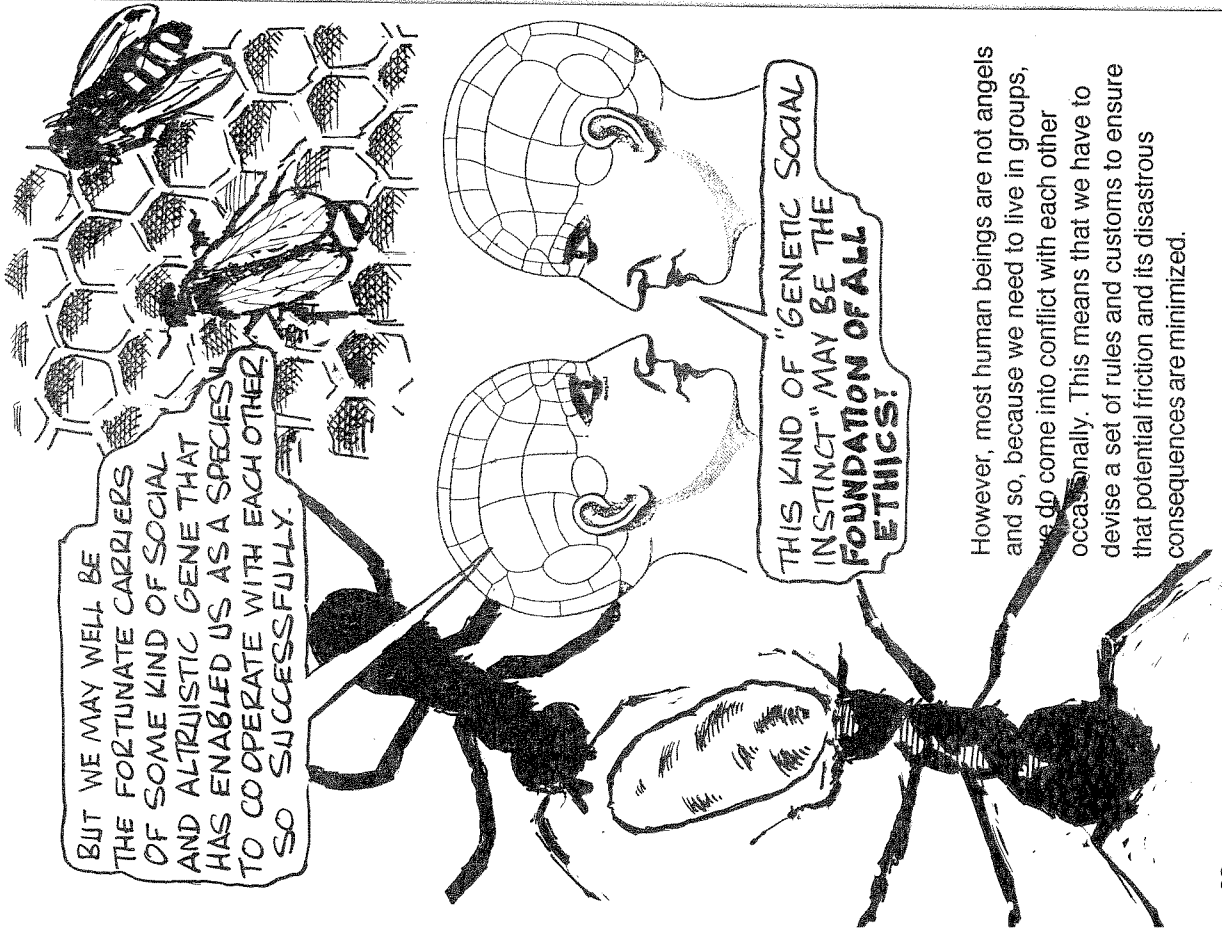
Nature provides evidence of co-operation amongst animals and plants, which is how "ecosystems" come into being in the first place. Many species apart from ourselves exist in harmonious groups and raise their offspring with apparent love and affection.

If human beings are "selfish" then they are so in an oddly co-operative way, otherwise there wouldn't be families, tribes and societies.



## The Social Gene

This is not to suggest that we are genetically and robotically programmed in the way that other social animals like ants and bees seem to be. Our programming is less fixed and absolute.



However, most human beings are not angels and so, because we need to live in groups, we do come into conflict with each other occasionally. This means that we have to devise a set of rules and customs to ensure that potential friction and its disastrous consequences are minimized.

## Symbolic Animals

We differ from animals by doing what we do consciously. Human beings are able to choose and take responsibility for the decisions that they make. Other animals live in a non-conscious, non-symbolic world of instinct, even though their behaviour can often appear to be "moral" when viewed from the outside.



Morality is not just a form of instinctive behaviour, like submissive ritual displays that animals use to ensure minimal conflict between rival males. Perhaps one day we will know more precisely what human nature is – how much of it is genetic and how much a result of nurture.

## Marx and Economic Determinism

Karl Marx (1818-83) was deeply opposed to the anarchists' benign view of human nature, which he condemned as unscientific and unrevolutionary. Marx declared history to be a series of different ages separated solely by different economic "modes of production" which consequently determined classes and the inevitable struggle between them.

THE DOMINANT CLASS OF ANY ONE HISTORICAL PERIOD WILL CONTROL THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION...

...AND INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THAT CLASS WILL ALWAYS FIGHT FOR THE INTERESTS OF THAT CLASS, OFTEN WITHOUT REALIZING IT!



This is because they are products of that class's "ideology".



An "ideology" is a collection of attitudes, values and beliefs held by groups of people. The "root proposition" of Marx's views on ideology is that "social being determines consciousness". The economic base of society determines its superstructure or its beliefs about everything like family life, religion and ethics.

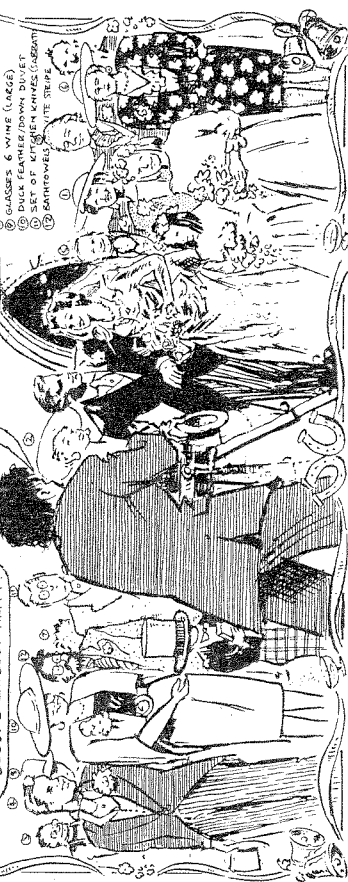
Capitalism has survived so successfully because the dominant class has monopolized education, religion, the law, the media and philosophy for over 200 years. People may hold different moral views about marriage: that it is a "holy sacrament", a "legal requirement", part of a "system of kinship patterns" and so on. But the "scientific" truth about marriage is its economic basis.

IT EXISTS IN ORDER TO PROVIDE A STABLE BUT FLEXIBLE WORKFORCE MADE UP OF NUCLEAR FAMILIES.



### THE BIG DAY...

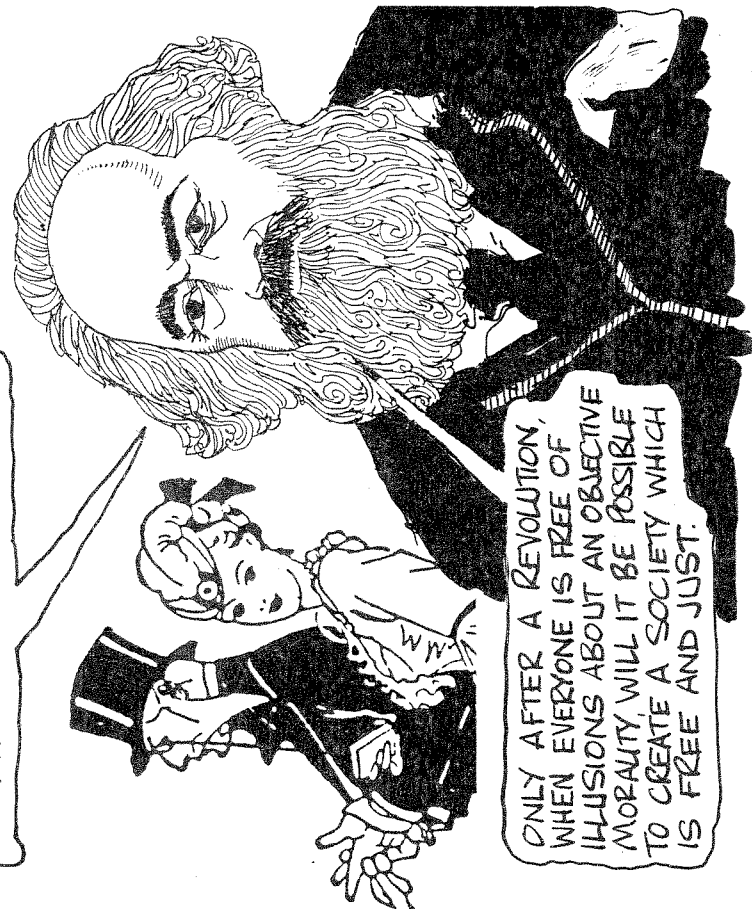
O-KAY! CAN WE HAVE THE GROOM'S MOTHER AS PARTNER WITH DISRESPECT TO THE BRIDE'S FATHER AND HIS PARTNER BOB HEZ MOTHER GRESSING BABY THE BRIDE'S FATHER AND HIS PARTNER BOB HEZ MOTHER WHO TOOK IT EABLY AT FIRST BUT IS OVER THE WOOST IN FACT THEY BE THE BEST OF FRIENDS IN MARRIAGE WAS A DISASTER AND WHO OULD HAVE GUN OFF WITH HER YEARS AGO WERE IT NOT FOR HIS CHILDREN.  
-GOOD! EVERYBODY HAPPY!



Marx is usually hostile to all moral theorizing and doctrine. So, "morality" is always ideology masking bourgeois or other economic interests.

## False Consciousness

An individual may believe he/she is acting on "moral" grounds, but he/she will always be acting in the interests of the predominant class. He/she will be a victim of "false consciousness". This is how ideology functions. It disguises the interest of one class as a universal moral interest.



PEOPLE ALL TOO READY TO BELIEVE IN THE DISINTERESTED NATURE OF BOURGEOIS "JUSTICE" AND "MORALITY" ARE, IN REALITY, FIGHTING RUTHLESSLY TO DEFEND THE INTERESTS OF THEIR CLASS.

ONLY AFTER A REVOLUTION, WHEN EVERYONE IS FREE OF ILLUSIONS ABOUT AN OBJECTIVE MORALITY, WILL IT BE POSSIBLE TO CREATE A SOCIETY WHICH IS FREE AND JUST.

False consciousness will then be exchanged for "class consciousness": people will not follow a set of moral rules without understanding their economic foundation.

Exactly how the revolutionary proletariat interest is impartially "good" is not very clear. Marx assumes that certain revolutionary intellectuals will remain uncontaminated by false consciousness and so will be sure of their own non-Capitalist moral certainty.



IS THIS NOT DANGEROUS?

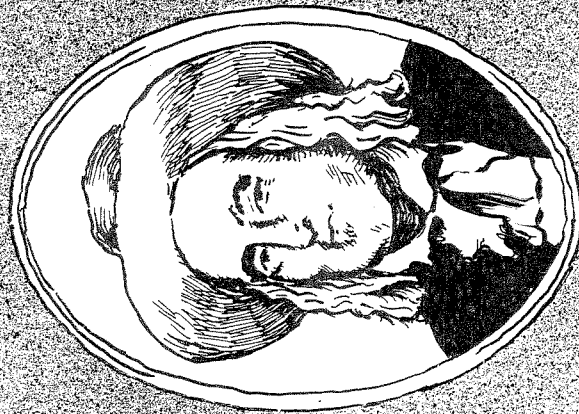
CAN WE BELIEVE THAT WHEN EVENTUALLY ALL RELIGION, LAW, MORES, PROPERTY AND THE STATE ARE ABOLISHED, SOMEHOW OUR MORAL BELIEFS WILL BE MORE "OBJECTIVE"?

## Moral Chickens and Class Eggs

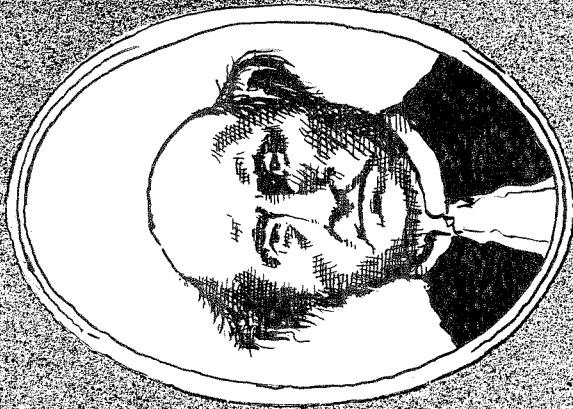
Marx's account of morality as a by-product of economic activity also seems odd. Without moral agreements or rules, society itself probably cannot get started, and so would be prior to features like "class" and "means of production". There is, however, clearly a complex and symbiotic relation between economics and morality. If the economic life of any society becomes chaotic, then the moral beliefs of individuals change quite rapidly.

## Utilitarianism

Another radically different way of looking "objectively" at morality is **Utilitarianism**. Both founders of Utilitarianism were child prodigies. **Jeremy Bentham** (1748-1832) could read Latin and Greek when he was five years old and graduated from Oxford at 16. **J.S. Mill** (1806-73) could speak fluent Greek at the age of three and was helping his father to write about economics when he was 14. Both men were radical empiricists. They thought that knowledge had to come from the senses and not just be invented by the mind. They were also fiercely democratic, anti-establishment, anti-monarchist, and anti-imperialist – rather unwise things to be in late 18th century and Victorian England.



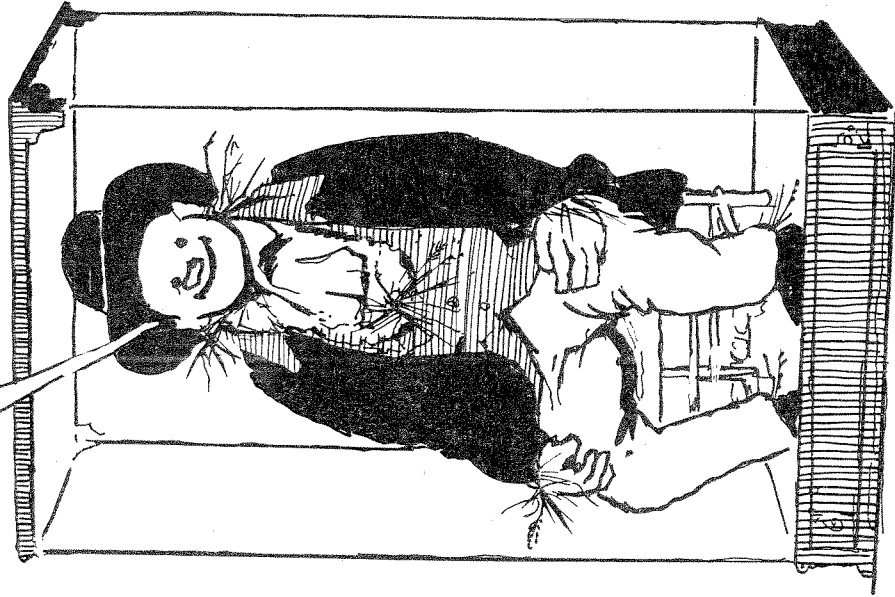
Jeremy Bentham  
1748 - 1832



John Stuart Mill  
1806 - 1873

Bentham was something of an eccentric recluse, so shy that he couldn't bear to see more than one visitor at a time. He kept rats and a pet pig which followed him around. He also designed a grim totalitarian prison – the Panopticon, so called because its every prisoner could be spied on 24 hours a day. He was a militant atheist and believed that dead relatives shouldn't be buried but stuffed and kept as ornaments in your house.

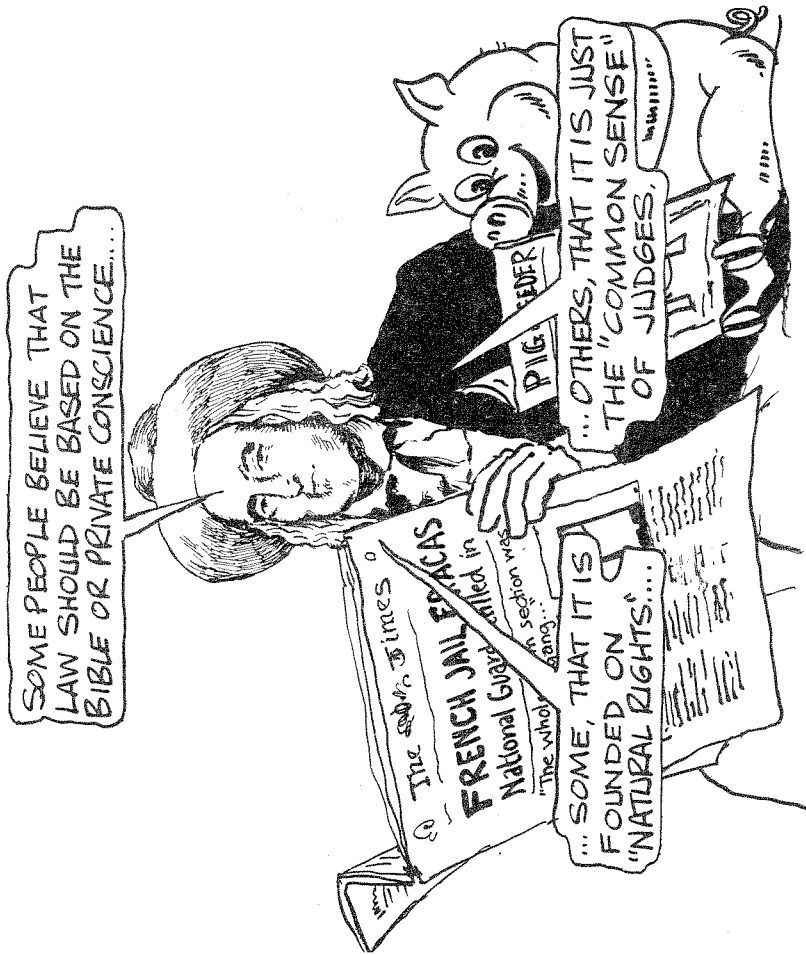
GET STUFFED!



When he died, his corpse was dissected before a group of friends and relations at University College, London. His skeleton is still there, padded with straw and topped with a wax head.

## The Law and Morality

Bentham was a lawyer, and wrote the snappily titled **Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation** in 1789 – the same year as the French Revolution. Bentham thought English law was a mess – largely because it was without any logical or scientific foundation.



Bentham thought that all these explanations were really "nonsense on stilts" or "ipse dixitism" – people saying English law was a good thing simply because they said so.

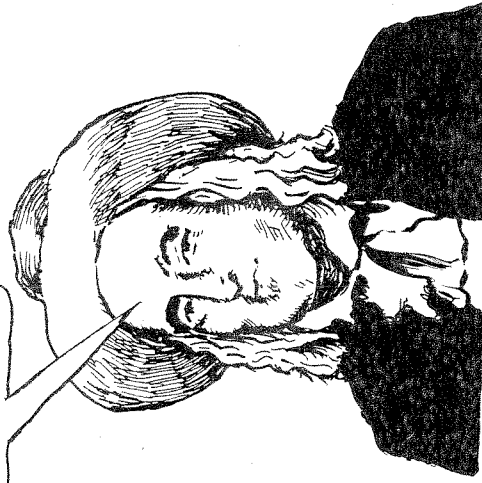
Bentham decided to make the law and morality "scientific" in the same way that sociology and psychology claim to make the study of human beings "scientific".

## Happiness Sums

He began, as moral philosophers often do, with his own definition of human nature. Human beings are "under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure". He means that human beings are pleasure-pain organisms who will always seek out pleasure and avoid pain. For Bentham, laws should be passed only if they maximize pleasure and minimize pain for the majority of people.

This is how Utilitarianism works.

INSTEAD OF RELYING ON VAGUE IDEAS ABOUT FEELINGS OR CONSCIENCE YOU CLASSIFY AND MEASURE ANY ACTION IN TERMS OF HOW MANY UNITS OF PAIN OR PLEASURE IT WILL PRODUCE.



You then set about doing "happiness sums" with something Bentham called "felicific calculus". (You ask how intense the happiness will be, how long it will last, how likely it is to occur, whether it has any unpleasant side-effects and so on.) You also try to ensure that the happiness is spread as widely as possible, so as to produce what Bentham called "The General Good" or "the greatest happiness of the greatest number".

## A Practical Example

Let's say the government wants to pass a law privatizing public utilities, for example. Take water. The public are polled for their opinions and feelings, and sums worked out and legislation passed accordingly.

### Pleasure and pain units

- +H = This will make me mildly content.
- +2H = This will make me quite happy.
- +3H = This will make me very happy.
- +4H = This will make me ecstatic with joy.
- H = This will slightly displease me.
- 2H = This will make me moderately unhappy.
- 3H = This will make me very unhappy indeed.
- 4H = This will make me suicidal.

If the opinion poll results are -3.5 million H units of public unhappiness but +5 million H units of happiness, then the water utility gets privatized and is a "good thing". The majority get what they want because Utilitarianism is democratic.

## Consequences not Motives

For Utilitarians, motives are unimportant; only consequences count. The stress is on the act rather than the agent. Bentham and Mill would argue that people's motives can't be seen or measured, but the consequences of their actions can be. This is why Utilitarianism is sometimes also known as "Consequentialism".

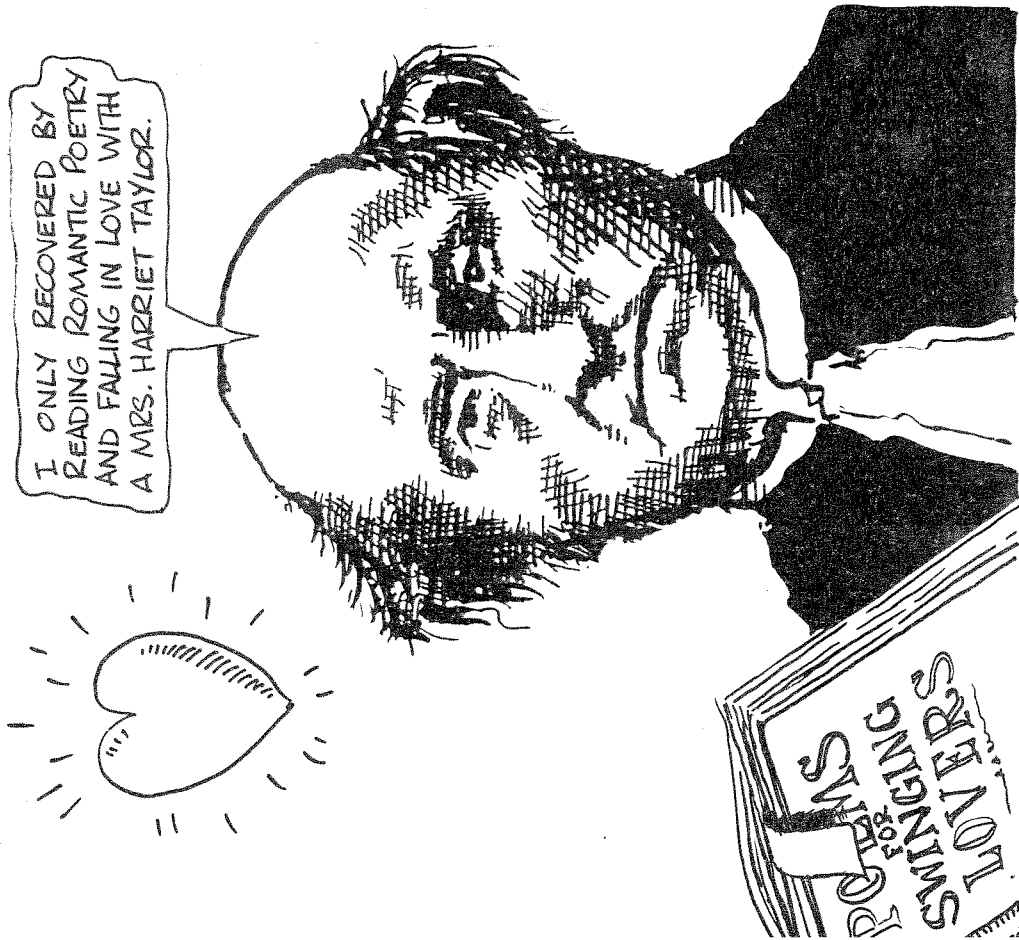
In certain rare situations, "Act" Utilitarians are allowed to break traditional moral rules if by so doing they produce a balance of happiness over misery. If a Utilitarian brain surgeon and a non-philosophical beggar were on a waterlogged raft that could only support one person...



By saving his own life and his medical skills, the murdering surgeon will bring about more happiness for more people than the beggar will ever be able to do in the future.



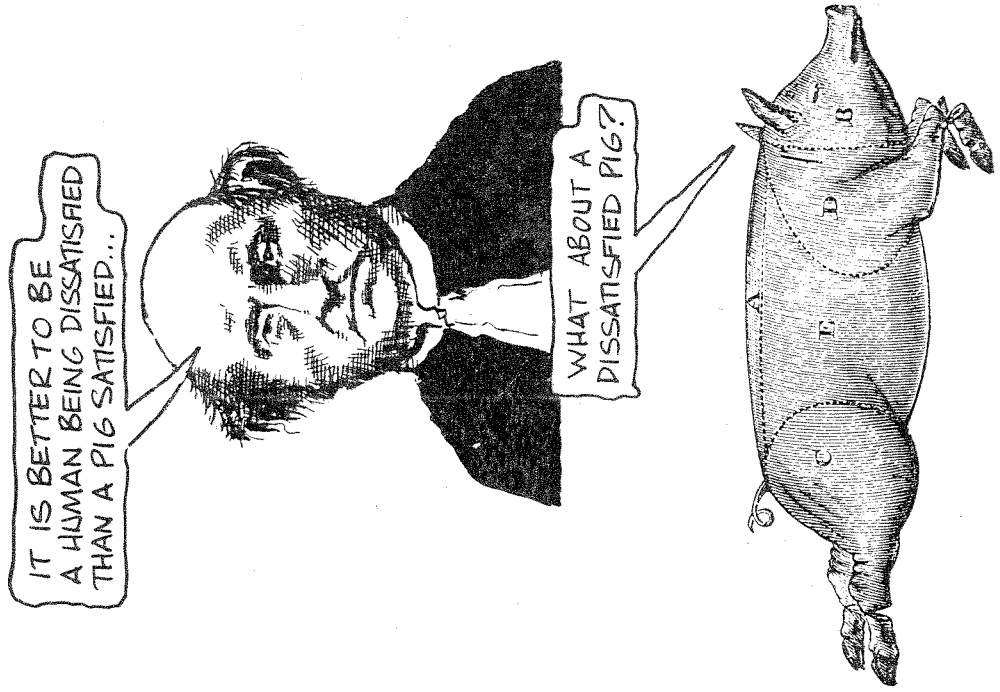
Bentham's disciple John Stuart Mill was force-fed with education until the age of 20 when he suffered a nervous collapse.



He worked as an official in the East India Company, eventually became an MP and led active campaigns for women's suffrage. His most famous books on ethics are **On Liberty** (1858) and **Utilitarianism** (1863).

## Mill's Ideas

Mill didn't agree with everything Bentham said. He believed that Utilitarianism could be made into a moral system for ordinary individuals as well as for lawmakers. He was worried about some of Bentham's more vulgar populist attitudes and preferred to talk about "happiness" rather than "pleasure". He thought that Utilitarian morality could be made less materialistic by prioritizing cultural and spiritual kinds of happiness over coarser and more physical pleasures.



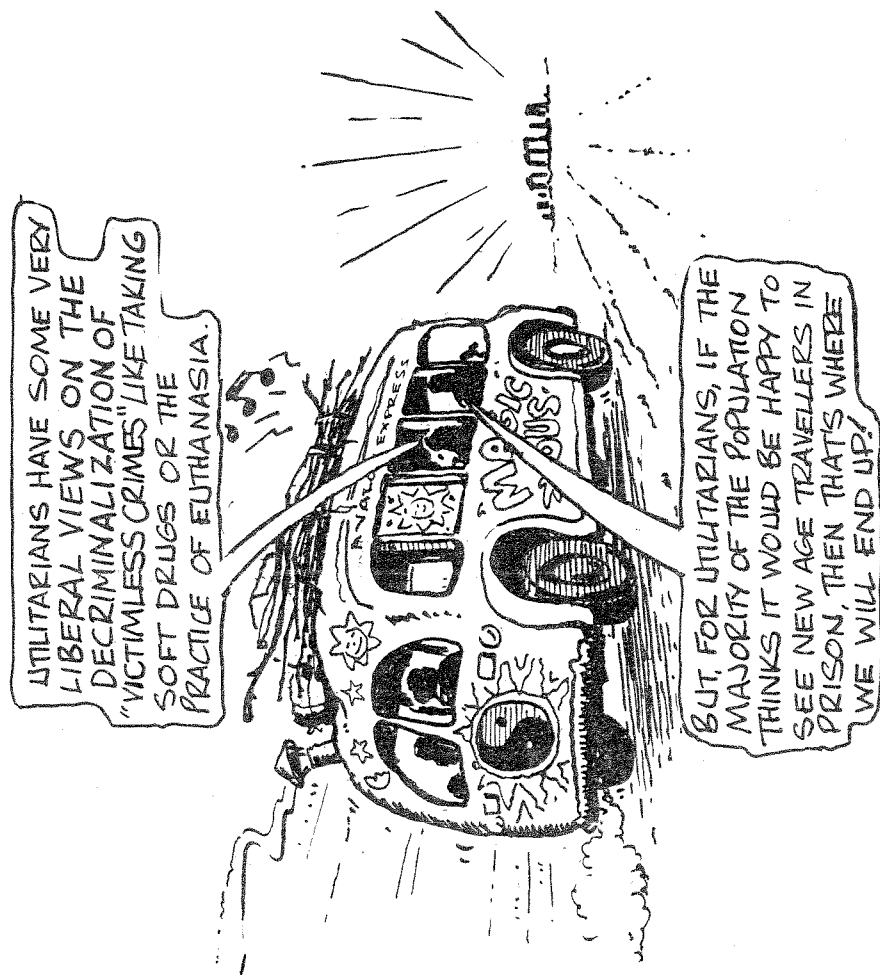
## Rule Utilitarians

Mill also thought that most ordinary people should normally stick to traditional moral rules, rather than "calculate" what they should do all the time. Perhaps this makes Mill a "Rule" Utilitarian – someone who believes that morality should still be about obeying moral rules, even if the rules are decided upon Utilitarian grounds. (You only obey those rules which experience has shown will produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number.) Some philosophers believe that morality is a matter of everyone always obeying rules.



## Mill's Pluralism

Mill worried about the "tyranny of the majority" in his essay **On Liberty**. He was a great pluralist. A healthy society would be one with a huge variety of different individuals and lifestyles with room for oddballs like New Age Travellers. So long as people don't interfere with the freedoms of others, they should be allowed to think and do what they like.



Under a Utilitarian system, the huge amounts of mild happiness registered by the majority will outweigh the much smaller amounts of intense misery that the travellers will feel.

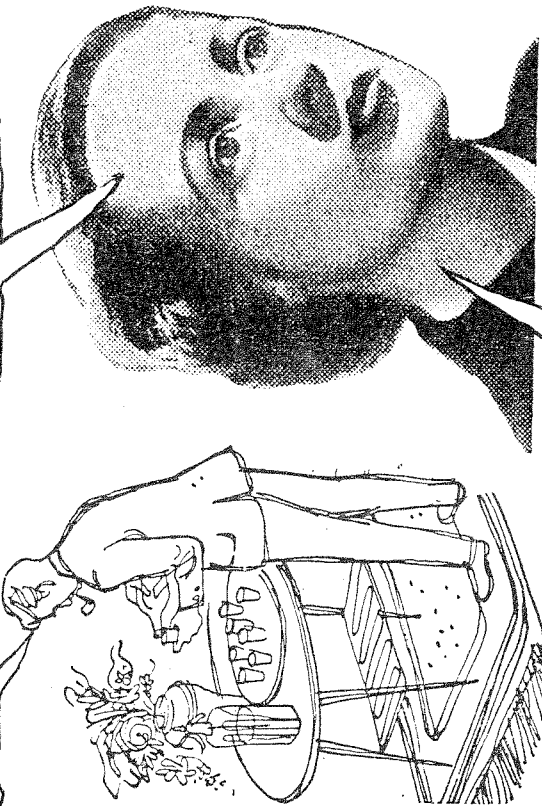
Utilitarianism may not guarantee the rights of individuals or minorities.

## What is Happiness?

The philosopher **Bernard Williams** (b. 1929) asks us to imagine a "Hedon machine" that produces instant non-addictive happiness which everyone uses during their leisure time. Most Utilitarians wouldn't find anything wrong with this kind of ersatz happiness, but there seems to be something wrong with the idea of it.

PERHAPS WE THINK THAT PEOPLE ARE MORE THAN JUST PLEASURE-PAIN ORGANISMS...

...PERHAPS WE EVEN NEED PAIN NOW AND AGAIN TO MAKE US FULLY HUMAN!



AND IS IT REALLY POSSIBLE TO "MEASURE" AMOUNTS OF SUBJECTIVE HUMAN HAPPINESS AND MISERY LIKE POTATOES IN THE WAY THAT BENTHAM INSISTS YOU CAN?

Happiness for Utilitarians often takes the form of "public good", like libraries, hospitals, schools, good drainage and so on. We may not be able to measure private subjective individual happiness, but perhaps public utilities and the happiness they produce can be measured. Utilitarians at least introduced the radical idea that the chief duty of government is to make the majority of their population happy.

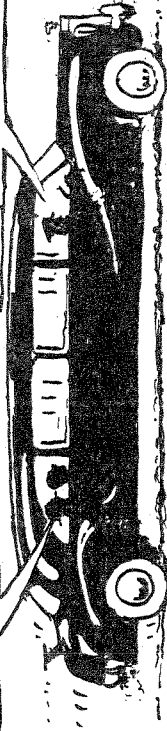
## Is It Really Scientific?

A moral philosophy that ignores people's motives seems odd. We like to think that being moral involves good thoughts as well as good deeds. And a moral philosophy that lets you break traditional moral rules "on occasion" is rather disturbing. Would you like to share a raft with a Utilitarian?

Furthermore, is it true that Utilitarianism can make ethics "scientific"? Mill tries to do this by a kind of semantic acrobatics – by declaring that the concept "good" means "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". But what the majority want isn't always good.

ALTHOUGH WE MIGHT WANT OUR OWN INDIVIDUAL HAPPINESS, DOES THIS MEAN THAT WE WILL AUTOMATICALLY WANT TO SEEK THE HAPPINESS OF EVERYONE ELSE?

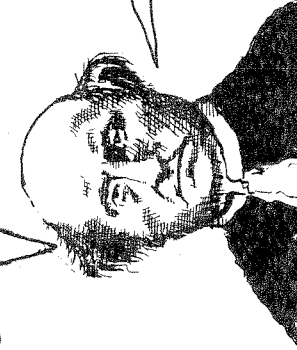
LOTS OF HAPPY, RICH PEOPLE DRIVE FAST BEGGARS LIVING IN CARDBOARD BOXES AND HAVE NO DESIRE TO SPREAD ANY OF THEIR OWN WELLBEING AROUND.



Mill had communitarian ideas about this.

LIVING IN A HAPPY, BEGGAR-FREE SOCIETY MIGHT BE WORTH PAYING FOR, BECAUSE IT WOULD BENEFIT EVERYONE IN THE END.

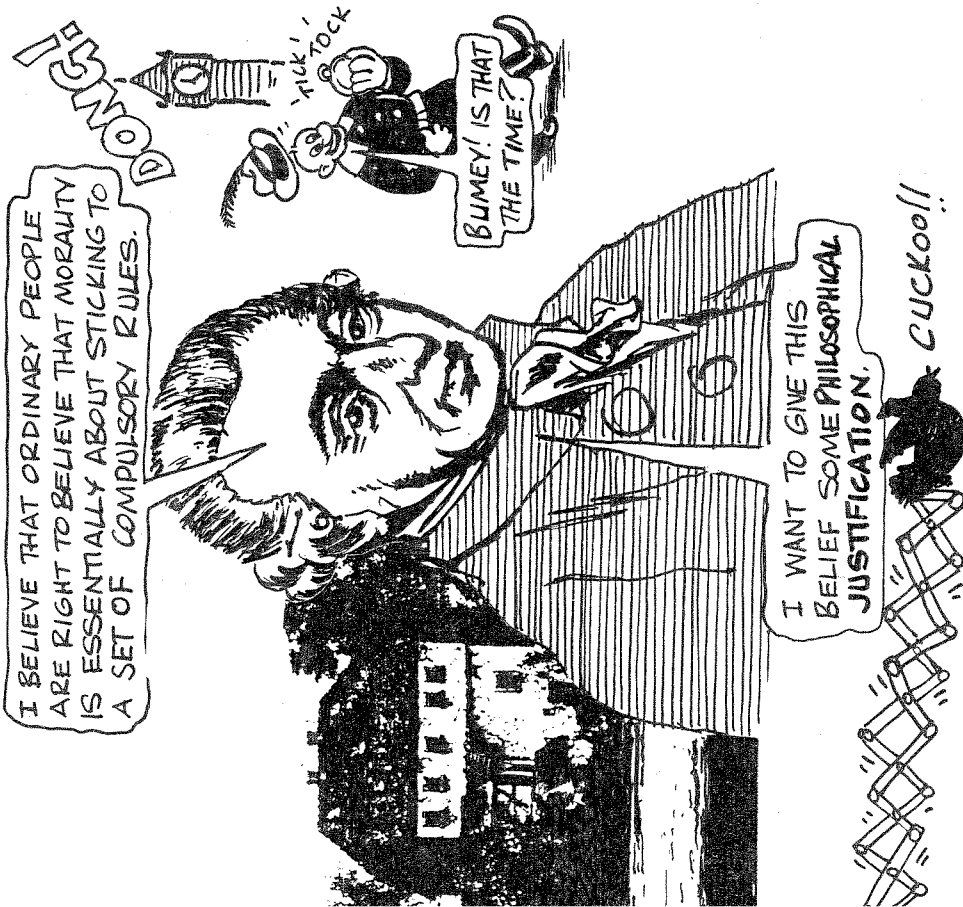
BUT THE MAJOR PROBLEM FOR ALL MORAL DOCTRINES REMAINS: HOW DO YOU PERSUADE PEOPLE TO CHOOSE TO BE GOOD?



One man who thought he could do that convincingly was Immanuel Kant.

## The Moral Law of Duty

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) didn't agree with what he'd heard of Utilitarianism, and thought that morality rarely had anything to do with happiness. Kant was born, lived, worked and died in Königsberg, a professional academic paid to study and teach philosophy. He was so ridiculously regular in his habits that people would set their clocks by observing his daily walks through the town.



This he set out to do in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

## Practical Reason

Kant started by asking what it is that distinguishes a moral action from a non-moral one. He concluded that a moral action is one which is done from a **sense of duty**, rather than following inclinations or doing what we want. This is why Kant is often known as a **Deontologist**, or believer in duties.



Kant begins with the assertion that humans are rational beings. People have "Theoretical Reason" to enable them to perform complex cerebral tasks like mathematics and logic. They also have "Practical Reason" to service their "good will". "Good will" is the motive that produces our determination to be good people, and our practical reason helps us get there.

## Duty versus Inclination

Doing our duty means always obeying certain compulsory moral laws or "imperatives", even if these laws may often seem tiresome or inconvenient to us personally. Being good is hard. It usually involves an internal mental struggle between what our duty is and what we would really like to do. This is where Kant radically differs from the Utilitarians. Deontologists like Kant often appear to be fairly miserable because they always deny themselves pleasures and grimly carry out their moral obligations.

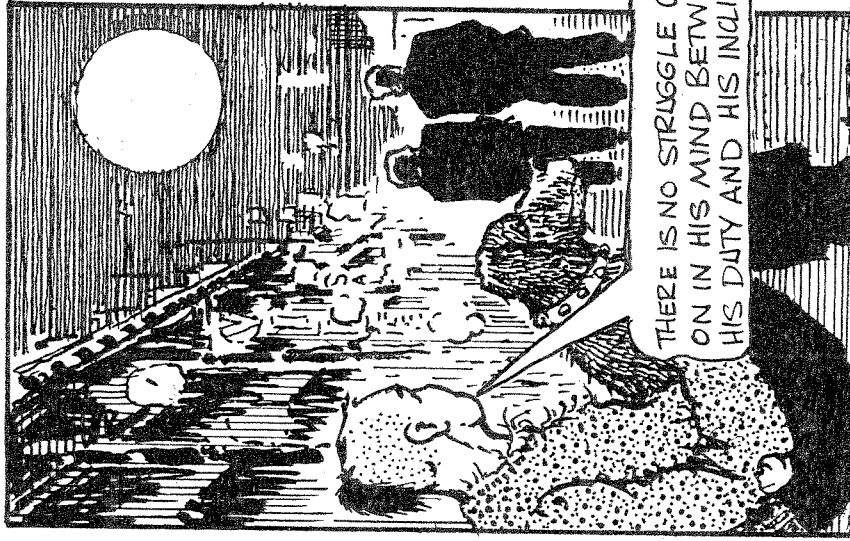
IT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE TO PERFORM ACTS THAT COMBINE INCLINATION AND DUTY...BY BEING A DUTIFUL AND LOVING PARENT, FOR EXAMPLE.



NEVERTHELESS, ACTS DONE FROM DUTY ARE ALWAYS SUPERIOR.

## The Parable of the Rich Young Man

Kant implies that a naive, rich young man who spontaneously gives money to beggars isn't a moral person. Although the consequences of his instinctive generosity are obviously good for local beggars, he has no idea of what his moral duty is.



THERE IS NO STRUGGLE GOING ON IN HIS MIND BETWEEN HIS DUTY AND HIS INCLINATIONS.

He is like a child who accidentally makes the right move in chess. He has no inner understanding of the game's rules or purpose. Morality for Kant is a serious business. It involves choosing **duties**, not wants; **motives** and not consequences are the central distinguishing feature of a moral action. Morality is not about **doing** what comes naturally, but **resisting** what comes naturally.

## The Universability Test

Kant explains how we can find out what the compulsory moral rules are. We work them out, not by asking ourselves what we would like to do, but by using our reason. He asks us to imagine what would happen if we "universalized" what we wanted to do, always making sure that we treated people as ends and never as means. Say we wanted to steal. If everyone stole from everybody else all the time then not only would society collapse rather rapidly but, more importantly for Kant, the concept of "stealing" would itself enter a kind of illogical "black hole".

NO ONE WOULD UNDERSTAND WHAT "STEALING" OR "PROPERTY" MEANT, IF STEALING BECAME THE NORMAL THING TO DO. SO, STEALING IS ILLOGICAL.



By using our reason and the "Universability Test", we have indirectly discovered a compulsory rule or "**categorical imperative**": Don't steal! This test is like a "moral compass", always revealing the correct "moral north" to us. This test also works against lying. If everybody lied all the time, then truth and meaning would both disappear. So, lying is irrational and not allowed. This is how Kant tries to show us why moral rules are compulsory.

## Inflexible Rules

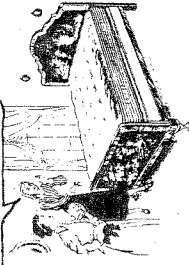
But can we really accept that it is never right to lie? Kantian ethics sounds too perfect for most human beings. Moral rules are rather like useful generalizations: in general we think it is best not to lie, but there are occasionally circumstances where it is obviously morally correct to do so.



Kant's system of compulsory rules seems monolithic and incredible because it doesn't allow for exceptions. It also doesn't help us choose **between** moral rules. Sometimes it is just not possible to keep a promise and to tell the truth at the same time.

IMAGINE A FEMALE FRIEND TOLD YOU SHE WAS HAVING AN AFFAIR, AND YOU PROMISED NOT TO TELL ANYONE.

I'M SEEING SOMEONE ELSE.



THEN HER HUSBAND ASKED YOU IF HIS WIFE WAS FAITHFUL. WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

IS MY WIFE SEEING SOMEONE ELSE?



In this situation it's simply impossible to keep your promise and tell the truth, and Kant doesn't offer you a method for deciding which rule to obey.

## Moral Imagination

Kant seems to think that as rational beings we "must" be moral, just as we "must" recognize that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . The problem is that the logical necessity of maths is internal to maths itself, whereas ethical choices are not "necessary" like this. Lots of people can and do choose to be wicked and carry out their evil deeds in a rational manner. But Kant is probably right to stress the importance of motive in ethics, and to insist that universality is an essential part of it.



Kant also stresses the importance of **moral imagination**. To be moral, we have always to imagine ourselves as being on the receiving end of other people's decisions. People who are wicked, in other words, may just be unimaginative.

## Ethical Doctrines Contrasted

Utilitarians and Deontologists are always arguing about what ethics should be like. Some people think that morality should be pragmatic and take human happiness and personal fulfilment into account. Others think that it should be pure and "above" human desires altogether.



Clearly Utilitarianism offers more flexibility, but Deontologists may protect morality with more vigour and take "backward looking" duties like promise-making more seriously. Both doctrines usually arrive at similar moral destinations, even if their ways of getting there are very different.

## Hume's Radical Scepticism

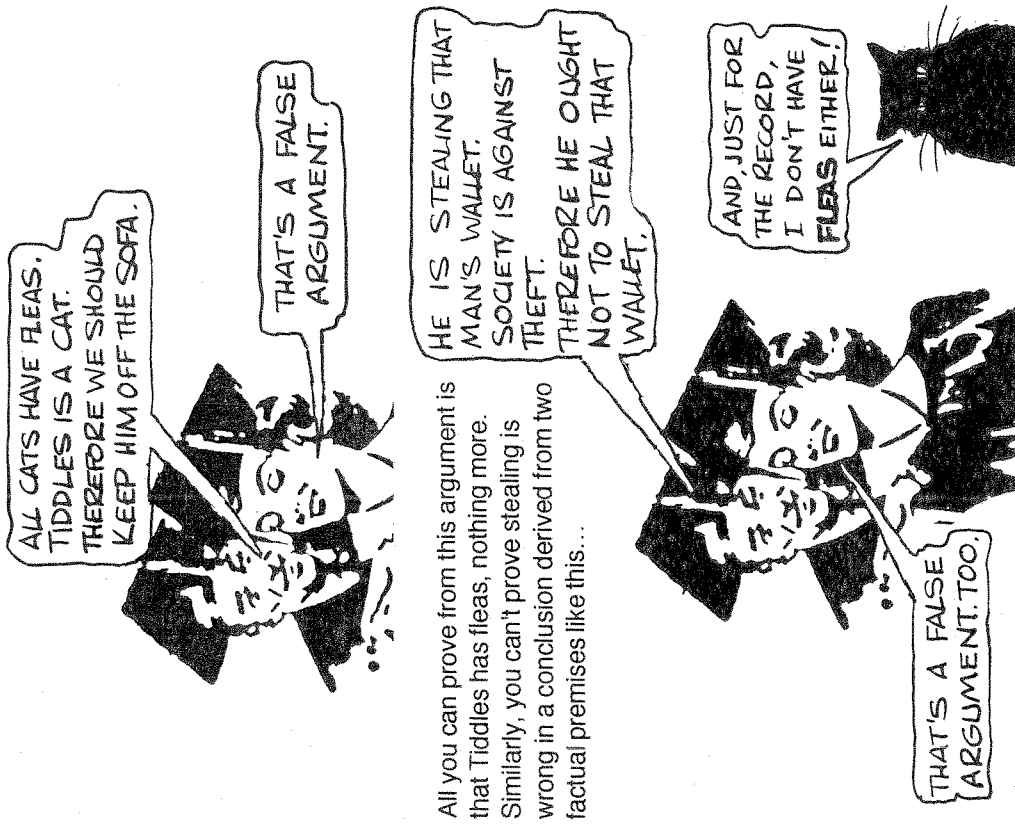
**David Hume** (1711-76), a Scottish philosopher, asked whether there could be such a thing as moral knowledge. Hume was a radical empiricist and a sceptic. He believed that virtually all knowledge has to come through our senses. Hume invented the type of ethical philosophy often called **meta-ethics** – the study of moral language, its meaning, function and certainty. Meta-ethics doesn't offer anyone moral advice. But its conclusions are often startling.

In his book, **A Treatise of Human Nature** (1740), Hume asks what a statement like "Murder is wrong" actually means.



"Murder is wrong" isn't saying the same sort of thing as "Grass is green", even though it looks grammatically rather similar.

Hume also says that we can't use logic or reason to "prove" the truth of moral beliefs either. The one big rule of deductive logic is that no one is allowed to magic extra information from an argument's premises into a conclusion. If you do this, then your argument isn't valid. Here's an example...

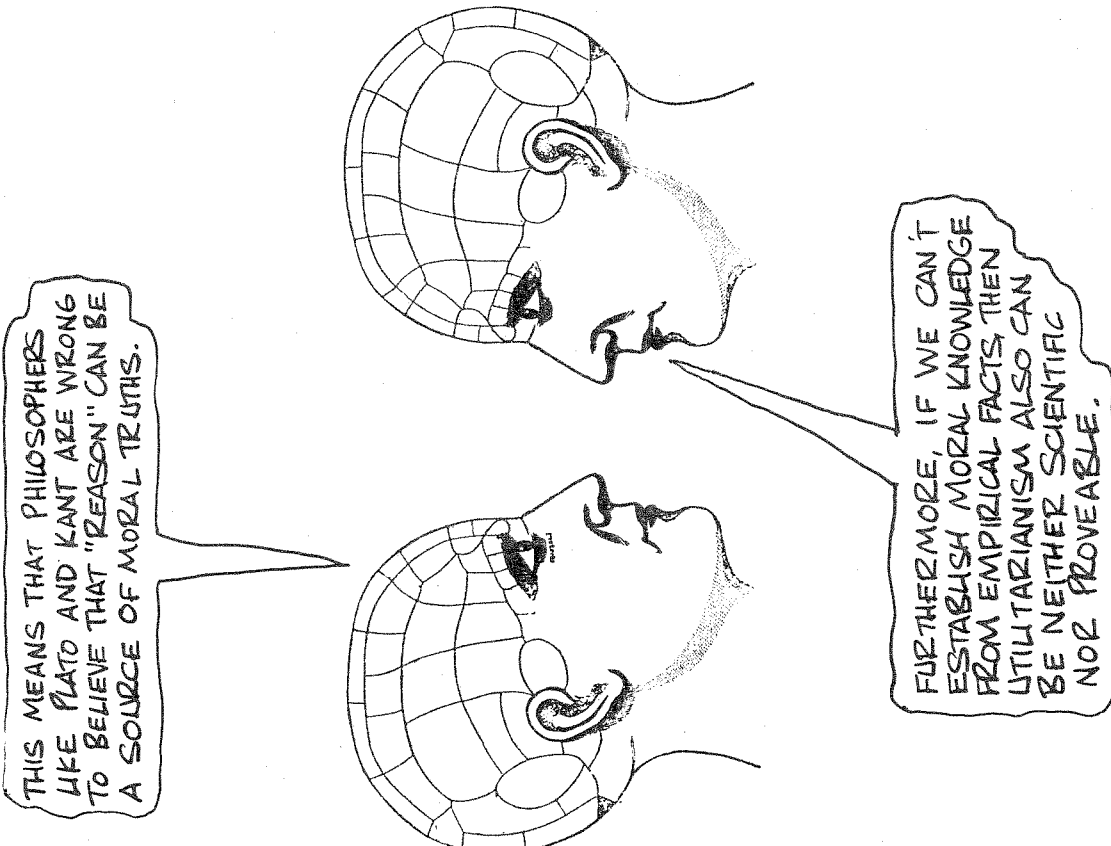


All you can prove from this argument is that Tiddles has fleas, nothing more. Similarly, you can't prove stealing is wrong in a conclusion derived from two factual premises like this...

There's a "gap" here between the factual statements ("is" ones) and moral statements ("ought" ones). The argument is invalid because it "jumps" to conclusions. You can't prove moral beliefs by using logic, which means you can't prove moral propositions just by piling up facts.



So, moral statements are a puzzle because they don't appear to fall into the standard categories of empirical or logical knowledge, which philosophers claim are the only real ones.




THIS MEANS THAT PHILOSOPHERS LIKE PLATO AND KANT ARE WRONG TO BELIEVE THAT "REASON" CAN BE A SOURCE OF MORAL TRUTHS.

FURTHERMORE, IF WE CAN'T ESTABLISH MORAL KNOWLEDGE FROM EMPIRICAL FACTS, THEN UTILITARIANISM ALSO CAN BE NEITHER SCIENTIFIC NOR PROVEABLE.

## Beliefs are Psychological

So what are moral statements? Hume concluded that a statement like "Murder is wrong" is really someone reporting their subjective feelings about murder to us. So, someone who says, "Murder is wrong" merely means "I disapprove of murder".



ALL WE CAN BE CERTAIN OF, FROM SUCH A STATEMENT, IS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE OF MIND OF ONE INDIVIDUAL.

Hume does try to reassure us by emphasizing that we'd all usually have similar feelings to this individual because we are all "sympathetic" beings who instinctively identify with other people in trouble. But the sceptical Hume is determined to show us that there is very little "knowledge" that we can ever be really certain about. Our moral beliefs are **psychological** rather than logical or empirical, but that doesn't mean they are trivial or unimportant. Hume pointed out that there is nothing to stop us organizing society on roughly Utilitarian grounds, to make as many people as happy as we possibly can.

## Is the "Is-Ought Gap" True?

Some modern philosophers are now less sure that Hume is right. There is a growing suspicion that the "is-ought gap" may be more of a doctrine than a fundamental truth about ethics. "Facts" like "money" and "debt" exist only against a background of social value judgements. It also doesn't seem true to say that moral words or statements are either wholly factual or wholly moral.



We can talk about social and institutional "facts", e.g. promise-keeping, which might produce a valid argument that goes like this...



## Subjectivists and Objectivists

**Subjectivists** agree with Hume that morality is no more than individuals telling us their feelings. They believe that there is no such thing as moral "knowledge" – feelings aren't facts.

**Objectivists** like Plato and the Utilitarians disagree. Utilitarians are "Naturalists" who believe it possible to make morality a form of empirical and scientific "knowledge". Plato, like most Christians, is a non-naturalist who also believes there is such a thing as moral knowledge, but that it comes to us from a mystical non-empirical source like intuition.

Is moral knowledge possible?

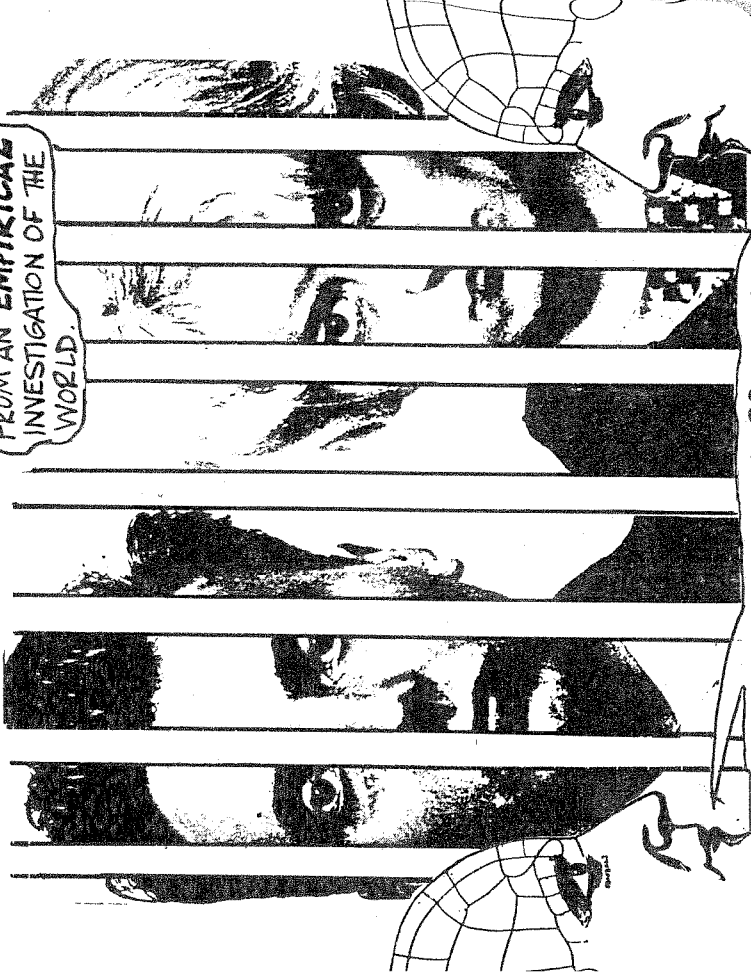
The views of Subjectivists and Objectivists are irreconcilable and odd.



But it also seems odd to claim that there is moral "knowledge". If someone says "There are people living on Jupiter", we know what sort of evidence is needed to prove this statement true or false.

HOW WOULD WE FIND EVIDENCE TO PROVE THAT "MURDER IS WRONG", THOUGH?

IT'S DIFFICULT TO ENVISAGE HOW WE WOULD EVER FIND OUT WHAT WE OUGHT TO DO FROM AN **EMPIRICAL** INVESTIGATION OF THE WORLD.



THIS MEANS WE CAN'T PROVE THAT CHILD MURDERERS SHOULD BE PUNISHED, OR ESTABLISH SCIENTIFICALLY THAT THEY SHOULD BE KEPT LOCKED UP FOR EVER JUST BECAUSE DOING SO MAKES LOTS OF PEOPLE HAPPY.

## Moral Language is Nonsense

One modern English philosopher, **A.J. Ayer** (1910-89), was as sceptical as Hume about the possibility of ethical "knowledge". Ayer's positivist analysis of moral language is even more aggressive than Hume's. In his **Language, Truth and Logic** (1936), Ayer claimed that moral language is meaningless. A statement like "Murder is wrong" isn't even someone reporting their feelings to us, but just **expressing** them. Ayer's **Emotivism** is sometimes called the "hurrah-boo" theory, because for him someone saying "Murder is wrong" is merely saying "Murder boo!" or making a kind of primitive emotional noise.

THIS MEANS THAT ANY KIND OF ARGUMENT BETWEEN PEOPLE ABOUT A MORAL ISSUE IS UTTERLY FUTILE, UNSOLVABLE AND IRRATIONAL.



EUTHANASIA  
**BOO!**

HOW ON EARTH COULD WE DECIDE WHO WAS RIGHT IN AN ARGUMENT LIKE THIS?

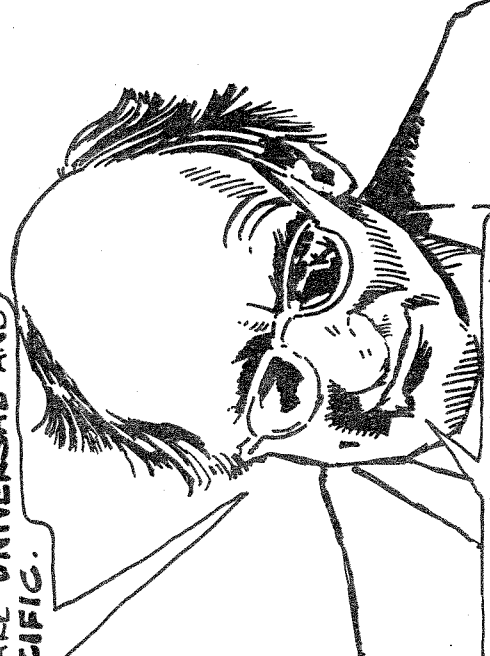
EUTHANASIA,  
**HURRAH!**

In Ayer's view, all "moral philosophy" had been some kind of linguistic and logical error. There is no such thing as moral "knowledge" or certainty, and there can be no moral experts who can tell us what is right or wrong.

Ayer's radical conclusions about the meaninglessness of moral language horrified many British moral "experts". They thought that his logical analysis of ethics would inevitably lead to nihilism and moral chaos.

## Prescriptivism

A more recent philosophical analyst, **Richard Hare** (b. 1919), is often known as a **Prescriptivist**. In **The Language of Morals** (1952), Hare claimed that a moral statement like "Murder is wrong" isn't just an expression of feelings, but more like a recommendation or an order, like "Don't murder". In this respect, Hare is Kantian.



I BELIEVE THAT MORALITY IS ABOUT OBEYING ORDERS OR FOLLOWING RULES. MORAL ORDERS ARE UNLIKE ORDINARY ORDERS, HOWEVER, IN THAT THEY ARE **UNIVERSAL** AND **NOT SPECIFIC**.



THIS IS WHY "DON'T STEAL" IS DIFFERENT FROM "DON'T USE A LATHE WITHOUT WEARING GOGGLES."

Hare was convinced that moral language possesses a kind of built-in "logic" of its own because it applies universal rules to specific cases, rather like logic does. So, like Kant, he thought to be wicked was to be inconsistent.

## The Importance of the Imagination


Hare also stresses the importance of the imagination in ethics. If universality is to function as a restraint on our behaviour, we have to be able to imagine what it would be like to be on the receiving end.




TRY SAYING: "YES, BECAUSE I AM BLACK, YOU MAY ENSLAVE ME..."



...OR "YES, YOU MAY KILL ME BECAUSE I AM A JEW."



SOME CRITICS HAVE POINTED OUT THAT A FEW INSANE RACISTS MIGHT STILL AGREE TO THIS, EVEN IF THEY WERE AT THE RECEIVING END!



BUT PERHAPS WE CAN NEVER HOPE TO DEMONSTRATE ETHICS TO FANATICS.

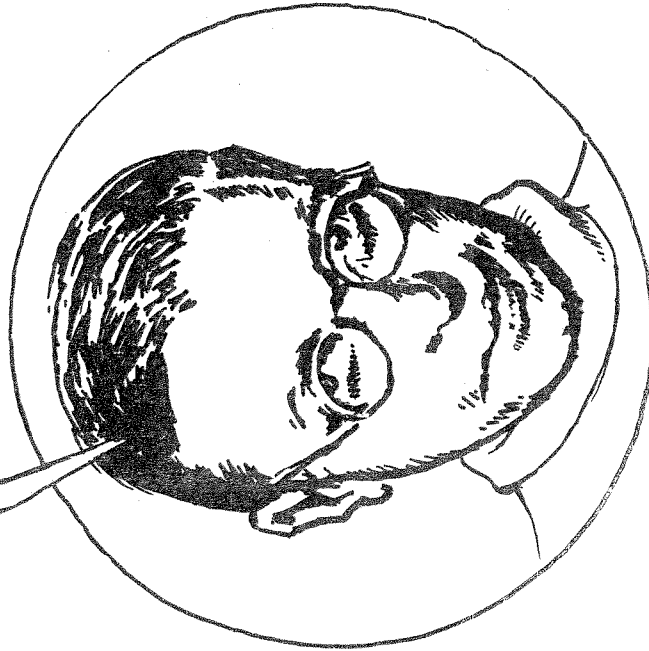
It's also not always clear when Hare would allow you to plead that you were a "special case". We'd all probably agree that a woman with a starving child outside a baker's shop could claim exemption from the "Don't steal" rule, but it's not easy to work out what "exemption rules" might be like.

Hare's Prescriptivism also has some strange consequences. For example, it seems odd to say that "Hitler was evil" means "Don't behave like Hitler" or that "St. Francis was a good man" means "Give all your property away and preach to the birds". Most people claim that statements like these are **descriptive** and not prescriptive at all.

## Choosing To Be: Existentialism

A more Romantic and individualist philosopher, the Existentialist **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-80) believed that every individual is unique and so no one can generalize about "human nature". This means that moral philosophy cannot be derived from a definition of "human nature", whether this be having a purpose (Aristotle), or being rational (Kant), or existing as a pain-pleasure organism (Bentham).

IT IS WE OURSELVES WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR "ESSENTIAL" NATURES OR CHARACTERS.



If we are "cowardly" then it is because we have chosen to be "cowardly", not because God or Nature made us that way. Similarly, if we are "wicked", then we can choose not to be so.

Although we are limited in what we can choose by "facticity" (like economics and genetics), according to Sartre we are "totally free" to make ourselves.

WE ARE NOT LIKE PAPER-KNIVES OR GINGERBREAD MEN, ALREADY "MADE" WITH SOME KIND OF PREDETERMINED CHARACTER



Those who deny the fact of this "freedom" are, for Sartre, "inauthentic" cowards and people of "bad faith". Those who seek or give moral guidance or advice are equally foolish and wicked. Furthermore, as a rule, society constantly restricts our personal freedoms and wants to mould us into "good citizens".

## The Student Who Couldn't Decide

In German-occupied France, a student couldn't decide whether to join the Resistance or to stay at home and look after his widowed mother.

V I A N D E S   A L I M E N T A I



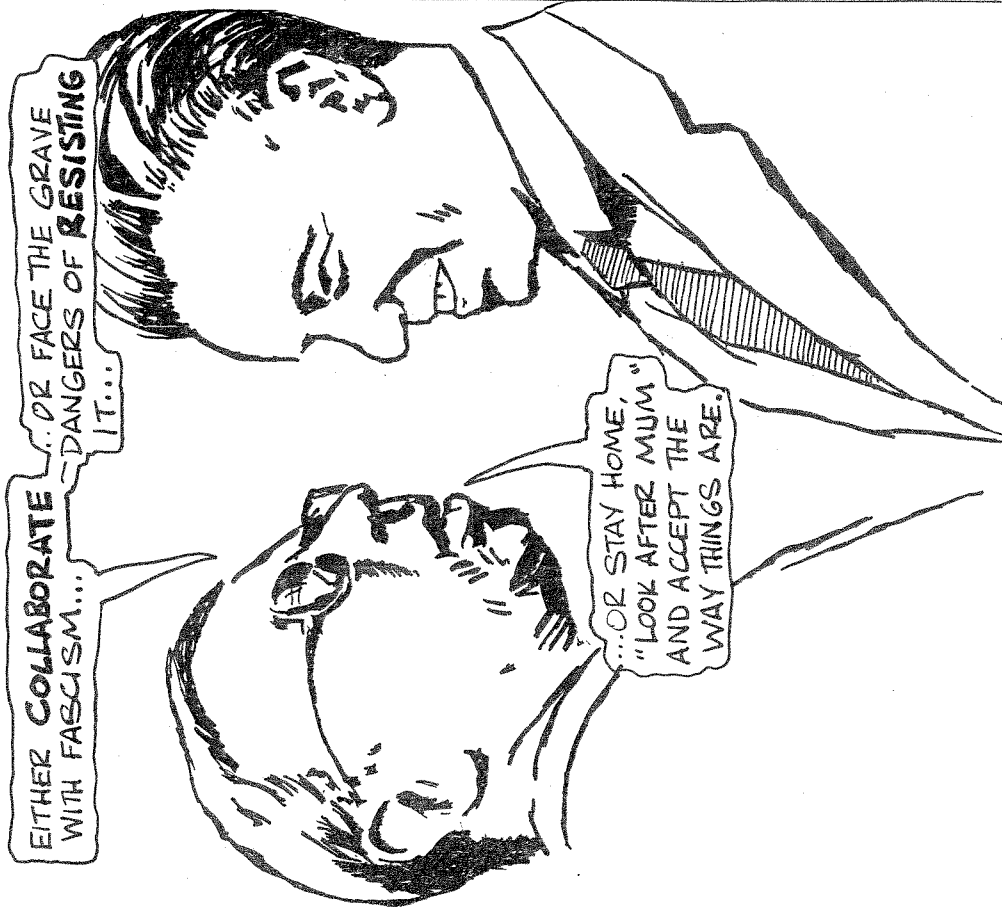
There are no moral "systems" or "rules" or "gurus" to help him. He is totally free to choose what to do. He must then be totally responsible for his final decision and all of the "anguish" that may result if he makes the wrong decision. Morality for Sartre centres wholly on the **freedom** of choosing, rather than on what is chosen. Sartre implies that moral decision-making for the student and for the rest of us is a lonely, intuitive and wholly individual business of making "fundamental choices".

In his essay **Existentialism and Humanism** (1948) he weakens his harsh advice somewhat with Kantian suggestions that good Existentialists will try to live a life of decisions "made as if for all men". But his attempt to drag a moral code out of existential doctrine isn't really convincing. It's his attack on moral belief systems, rules and doctrines that makes the deepest impression.



It also seems odd to believe that Sartre's student has to make any "fundamental" moral choice. Most people would say he is choosing between two rules: Thou shalt protect thy Murr and Thou shalt defend thy country. Sartre's views about our "total freedom" are also strange. Many might claim that their freedom is far from "total".

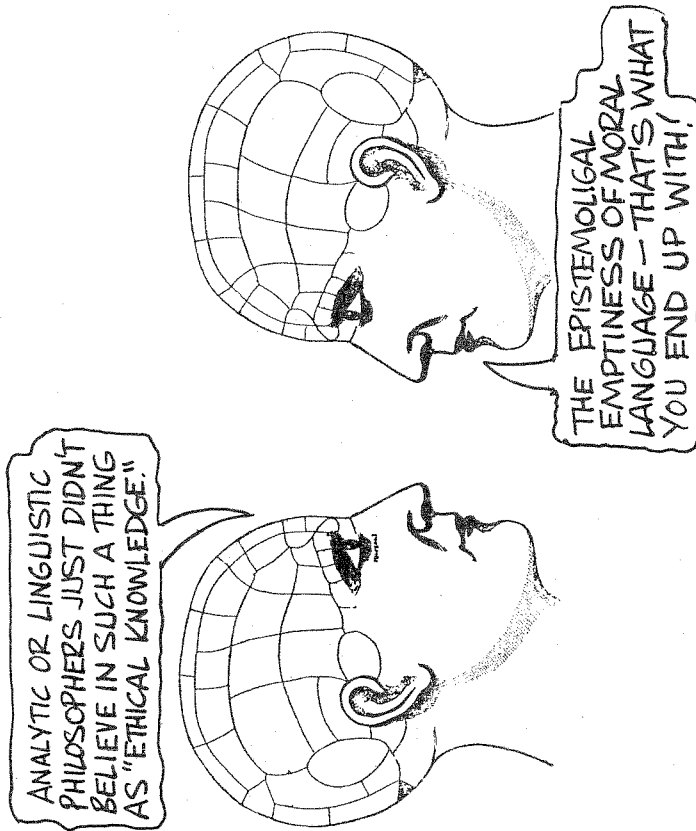
Sartre's claim for "existential freedom" must be seen against the gloomy wartime background of Nazi-occupied France and the totalitarian nightmare of Fascist regimes spread across Europe and the Far East. What options did the individual have under such conditions but a stark, anguished choice?



No wonder Sartre and the other Existentialists emphasize that the features of individual ethical action are "anguish", "despair", "absurdity" and "courage". Total freedom is paradoxically the only choice which totalitarian un-freedom offers. Problems of "human nature", "reason", "utility" and so on, become irrelevant when the stakes are total.

## The Road to Postmodernism

The story of post-war ethics is one of accelerated disillusion and uncertainty. There are several reasons for this. One is the change of emphasis in post-war philosophy from the problems of knowledge to the problem of meaning. As we have seen, this brought about the removal of ethics from epistemology.



Ethical statements like "stealing is wrong" cannot be verified empirically or guaranteed by logic and so become no more than subjective, emotional utterances. And if all moral philosophy has been doing is to produce "pseudo-propositions" which are nonsensical, then all ethical foundations disappear. We are left with unprovable human beliefs without any foundation and offering no guarantees.

## What Is This Thing Called "Human Nature"?

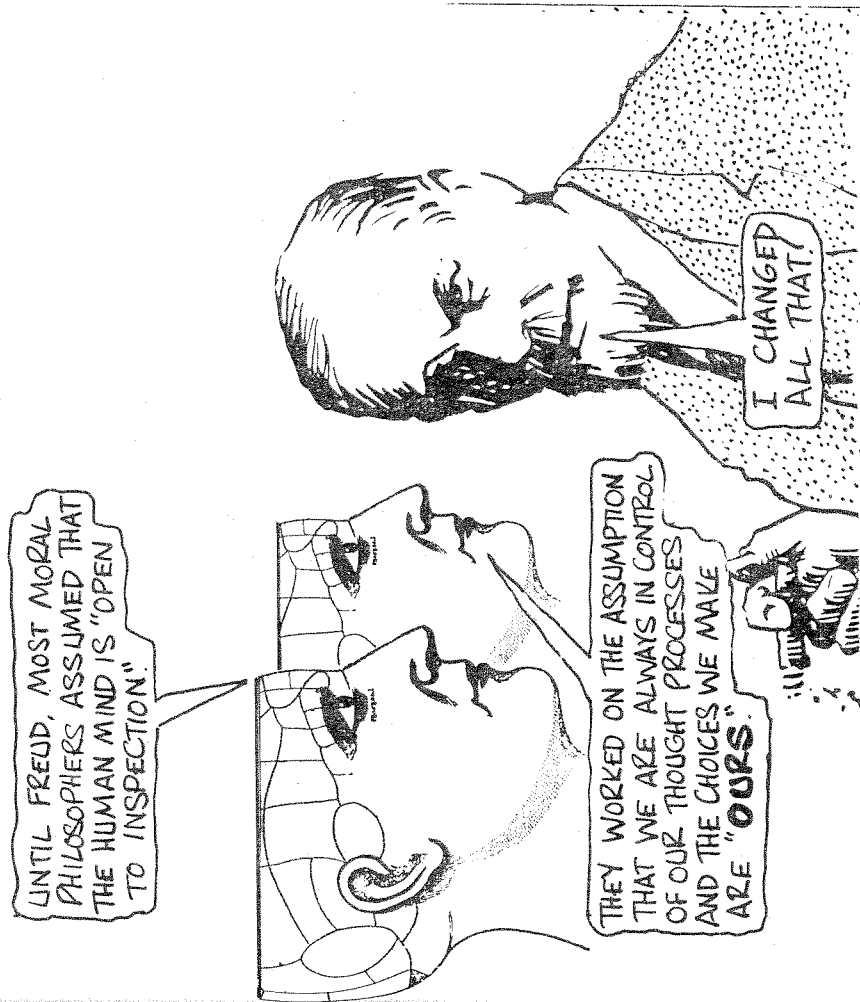
Sartre's point about the "subjectivity" of ethics is an important one, because it re-emphasizes doubts about the traditional definitions of "human nature".



The existence of this huge variety of claims made about human nature probably indicates the difficulties of ever defining it satisfactorily or convincingly. 20th century views about human nature have been shifting rapidly and radically. We can now see more clearly that definitions of human nature are usually ideological artefacts – persuasive myths used by one group to suppress another.

## Freud's Model of the Psyche

It is also very difficult to engage in this "definitions exercise" after the introduction of psychoanalysis into the Western intellectual tradition. **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939) may not be the great scientist he thought he was, but he has radically altered our understanding of ourselves as moral beings.



Freud's view of human nature is a determinist one. Human beings are programmed by instinctive psychic structures constructed from infancy to maturity in "layers" of the **Unconscious, Ego** and **Super-Ego**. The "real" workings of human nature can be viewed most clearly in neurotic and psychotic individuals, or in the dreams or "verbal slips" of "normal" and "healthy" individuals.



## The Unconscious and Moral Autonomy

Our Unconscious exerts powerful pressures upon us to fulfill our instinctual desires, which the Super-Ego insists the Ego deny. The Super-Ego is similar to the "conscience"; it is like a parental voice forcefully reminding us of social norms acquired throughout childhood. The conscious Ego spends much of its time refereeing between the authoritative Super-Ego and the equally insistent but more primitive voice of the Unconscious.

This tripartite model of human nature has been criticized as utterly unscientific, which it undoubtedly is. But, as a metaphorical explanation of the human psyche, it has had immense cultural force. Freud stresses the constant and inevitable conflict that must occur between the unconscious desires of the individual and the censoring and controlling forces of civilization.

**IN ORDER TO BECOME SOCIAL BEINGS WE HAVE TO SACRIFICE AND DENY SOME INSTINCTUAL SATISFACTIONS.**

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*when you know how!*

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If we are almost totally ignorant of the real sources of our attitudes, propensities and desires, then how can we ever be fully in control of our moral lives? We may have causes of, and not reasons for, our moral behaviour. If Freud's determinist vision is true, then it places severe limits on any notion of personal moral responsibility.

The necessity of free-will in any moral agent is as old as Aristotle. Hume pointed out that although our actions may be "caused" or "determined" this does not mean that we are "coerced" or "forced" to behave in certain ways.

**IF MY ARM JERKS INVOLUNTARILY AND HITS SOMEONE, THEN I AM NOT TO BLAME; BUT IF I CHOOSE TO HIT SOMEONE - EVEN IF MY CHOICE IS DETERMINED - THEN I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT I DID.**

**BUT I SUGGEST THAT WE DON'T REALLY "OWN" OUR INNERMOST THOUGHTS IN THE WAY THAT HUME BELIEVES WE DO.**

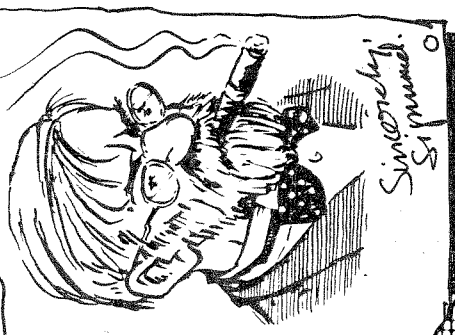
Most moral philosophers might say that although Freud may be right to claim that our inner selves can be shaped and governed by both internal and external forces, we are not wholly controlled by them. If we are, then it certainly doesn't feel like that - not many people have a core belief of themselves as moral robots.

## Lacan: the Fiction of the "Self"

Freud's most radical modern disciple is **Jacques Lacan** (1901-81). Lacan is radical because he suggests that the Unconscious is by no means some primitive entity that we must control through our conscious selves, but is in fact the "nucleus" of our very being. "I am where I think not."

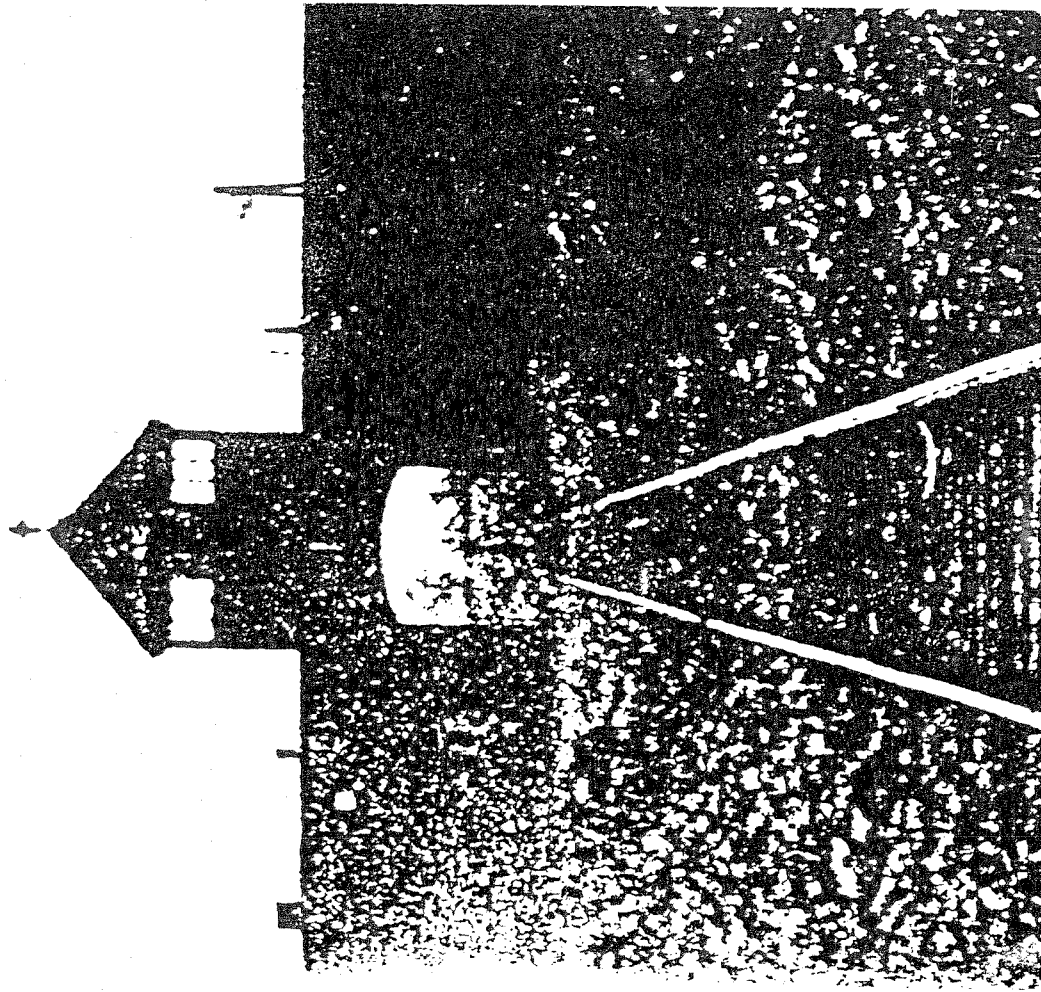
According to Lacan, the Unconscious is structured like a language which is why it often reveals its presence to us through wordplay. The "self" is therefore essentially linguistic and, since language exists as a structure before the individual enters into it, then the whole notion of "human identity" becomes deconstructed and untenable.

THIS MEANS THAT MORAL PHILOSOPHY (WHICH INEVITABLY STRESSES THE PRIMACY OF MOTIVE AND AUTONOMY) IS UNDER THREAT. IF THE "SELF" IS A FICTION, HOW CAN SELF-KNOWLEDGE OR MORAL CHOICES BE "OURS" AND NOT MERELY LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTS?



## The Holocaust and the Betrayal of the Enlightenment

Probably the most important influence on post-war ethics was the Second World War itself. The efficient and "rational" industrialized slaughter of millions of innocent civilians by a civilized Western nation accelerated an erosion of belief in human potential and ethical progress. The horrors of the concentration camps led to a more cynical view of human nature as something nastily Hobbesian, or worse, as something wholly "plastic" and empty, waiting for leaders to do its moral choosing for it.

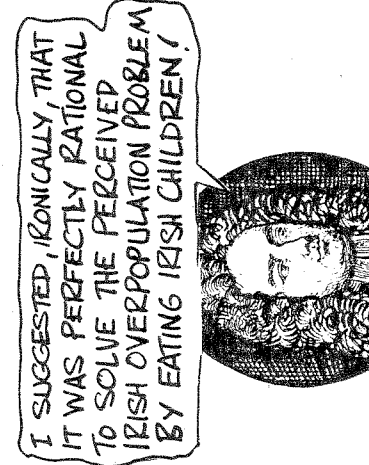


## The Dangers of "Reason"

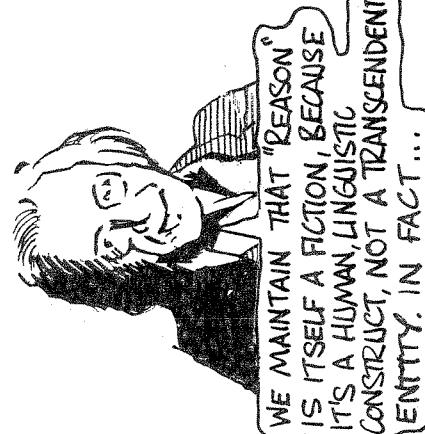
The disturbing combination of the blind obedience of many people to amoral monsters and this systematic pointless extermination of minorities sent many post-war philosophers and thinkers scurrying off to find explanatory theories of all kinds for the mystery of this large-scale evil.



What the war made clear was the role of "reason" in planning and creating so much human suffering. The more intelligent British Enlightenment writers and philosophers, like Hume and Swift, always had deep suspicions about reason as a source of moral wisdom, and constantly undermined it.



More recent "postmodernist" thinkers, such as Jean-François Lyotard (b. 1924) and Jacques Derrida (b. 1930), are more radical.



Too many philosophers have held an absolute faith in reason and its ability to produce that which is universal, true and eternal. This kind of blindness to the reality (that our beliefs are merely selective and contingent linguistic constructs) can lead to dangerous political certainties which insist on the exclusion of "the other" – sometimes in the form of powerless and vulnerable minorities.