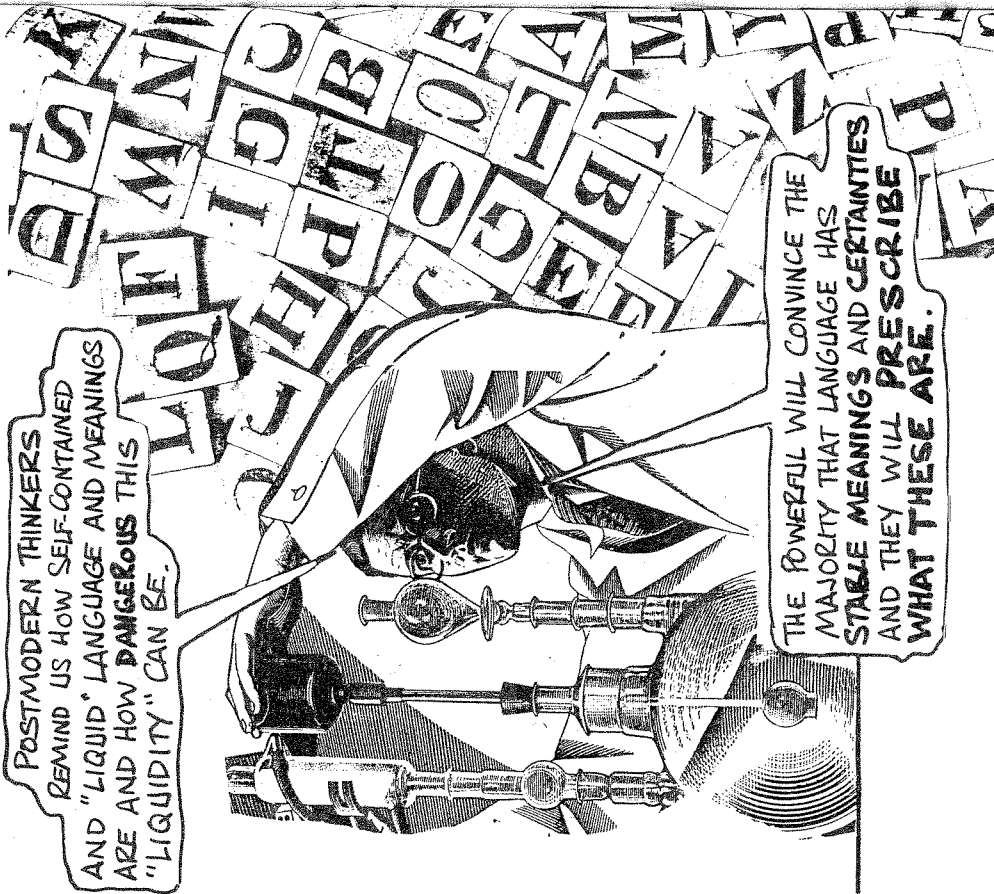


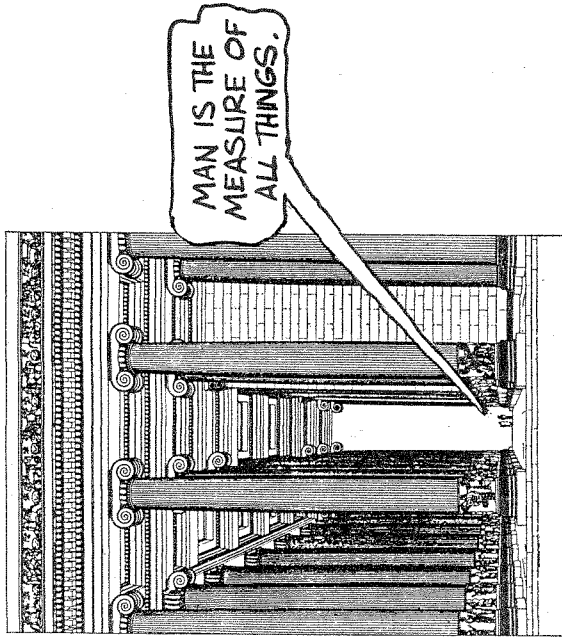
Postmodernist Scepticism

So, ethics is in trouble – its language is merely an expression of emotional noises, the "human nature" on which it is so often based is only a fiction, and our belief in a transcendent "reason" as a source of moral wisdom may produce something very different – efficient evil.



This takes us into the new abyss of **POSTMODERNISM** itself, which has increased ethical scepticism and uncertainty even more. Postmodern philosophers have added to this loss of ethical certainty by a kind of abandoned "celebration of relativism".

It's also more clear now that moral philosophers in the past have been doing little more than playing their own kind of localized language game.



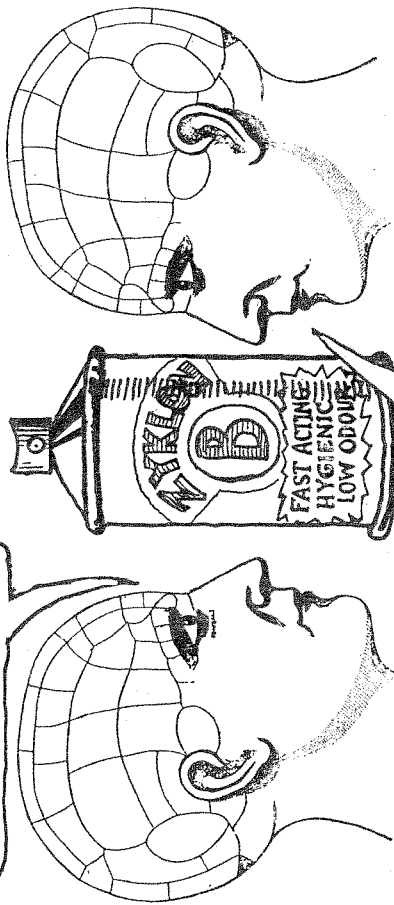
This kind of sceptical conclusion is not new to the 20th century. Protagoras the Sophist said similar things in 5th century B.C. Athens. And much of "postmodern" thinking can be traced back to **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900) and his blitz on "metaphysics".



Human, All Too Human

Postmodernism has shattered many long-held beliefs. It is wholly sceptical about the existence of some kind of "objective reality" or the possibility of using "reason" to understand it. It is even more doubtful about the existence of any kind of "human nature". This means there is no "Archimedean lever" or supreme principle that can tell us which ethical system is the "best" or the "truest" one. We live in a relativistic universe where there are only human truths and human ethics.

THIS LACK OF MORAL CERTAINTY CAN LEAD TO APPALLING KINDS OF PROBLEMS. HOW CAN WE CONDEMN SOCIETIES WHOSE MORAL BELIEF SYSTEMS WE FIND TOTALLY REPUGNANT?



SOCIETIES BUILT ON SLAVERY, FOR EXAMPLE, OR THOSE WHICH BELIEVE IN NOTIONS OF RACIAL PURITY AND USE GAS CHAMBERS ON THEIR OWN CITIZENS?

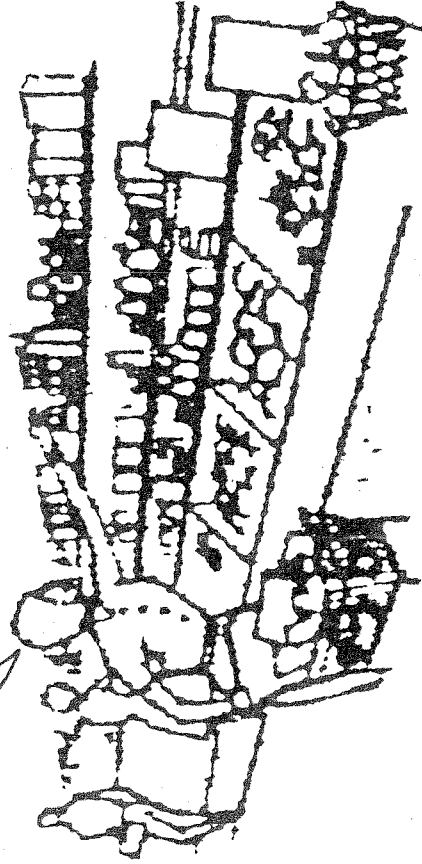
If there are no clear and proveable moral values which we can all agree on and share, then how can we prevent future evils performed by individuals or governments on the rest of us?

Postmodernist Visions: Supermarket Slavery

So what moral futures does Postmodernism offer us? Postmodernism celebrates uncertainty and variety, so it's unlikely to point with certainty to any one ethical destination. But here are a few ...

The late Capitalist future could be one of scarce resources, genetically engineered humans, huge corporate employers of slave labour, and hi-tech surveillance of channel-hopping consumers who inhabit a present-tense world of images. The constant "Spectacle" of consumerist images would control and hypnotize individual citizens to accept the "morality" of Capitalism.

THIS MORALITY INSISTS ON THE NEED TO PRODUCE AND CONSUME, THE ACCEPTANCE OF MEANINGLESS WORK, AND THE ISOLATION OF INDIVIDUALS FROM EACH OTHER.



WESTERNERS WILL BECOME SLAVES AT WORK AND SLAVES IN THE SUPERMARKET.

INDIVIDUAL MORALITY WILL CEASE TO EXIST. THE ONLY CHOICE WILL BE THAT MADE BY CONSUMERS BETWEEN PRODUCTS.



Post-Marxist Critical Theory

These ideas about Capitalist morality and ideology originate from several 20th century thinkers, often loosely and misleadingly categorized as "Marxist". They all tend to emphasize how political our "personal morality" is, and how little of what we believe will genuinely be "ours".

Antonio Gramsci (1891-

1937) introduced analytic terms like "hegemony" to

help us understand how little freedom we have to think new political or moral ideas.



BECAUSE PEOPLE TEND TO REGARD THEIR SOCIAL WORLD AS "FIXED" OR "EMBEDDED", CAPITALIST CLASSES AND GOVERNMENTS ARE ABLE TO CONTROL POPULATIONS BY PERSUADING THEM THAT A CAPITALIST SOCIETY IS "NATURAL" AND "COMMON-SENSICAL".

Gramsci stressed the crucial role of the ideological superstructure (schools, churches, the media, families etc.) in manufacturing the consent of ordinary people in their own oppression.

Herbert Marcuse (1898-

1979) subsequently

explained how Capitalism forces people to see

themselves primarily as "one dimensional" isolated consumers with false needs.

I SHOP, THEREFORE I AM.

Capitalist States produce "closed" forms of discourse, so that alternative views are made virtually impossible.

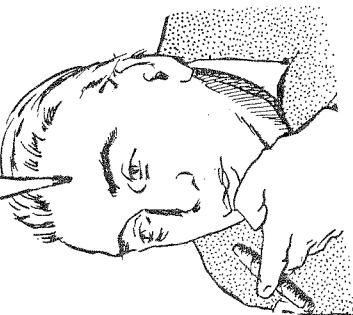


HUMAN SOCIETIES SECRETE IDEOLOGY AS THE VERY ELEMENT AND ATMOSPHERE INDISPENSIBLE TO THEIR HISTORICAL RESPIRATION AND LIFE.

Roland Barthes (1915-80)

emphasized the point that "reality" is made; it is a social construct that derives meaning from a complex system of signs. So, whoever has the dominant discourse can determine what is "real".

MUCH OF WHAT IS CULTURAL AND POLITICAL IS "NATURALIZED" INTO WHAT IS "COMMON SENSE" ... IT "GOES WITHOUT SAYING..."



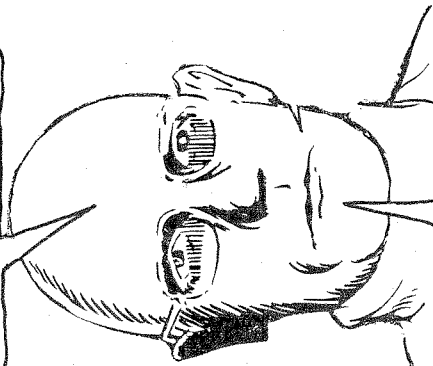
Barthes uses the term "myths" to describe ideological constructs that parade as being "natural". An obvious example would be the myths or ideological constructs about "the poor".

THE POOR ARE WORKSHY PROBLEMATIC FOR THE REST OF US, THEY CAN'T BUDGET, THEY HAVE LOW INTELLIGENCE AND ARE "ALWAYS WITH US".

Michel Foucault (1926-84)

extended Marx's views about knowledge as a form of "ideological construct". For Foucault, knowledge is a "construct" used by the powerful to oppress the weak.

BY CLAIMING THE TERRITORIES OF "REASON" AND WHAT IS PERMISSIBLE AS THOUGHT AND BEHAVIOUR, THE POWERFUL ARE ABLE TO CONVINCCE EVERYONE THAT WHAT IS "LOCAL" AND "REGIONAL" IS IN FACT UNIVERSAL AND SO UNQUESTIONABLE.



THOSE WHO DISSENT ARE THEN CATEGORIZED AS MAD OR IRRATIONAL AND CAN BE DEALT WITH ACCORDINGLY.

Nietzschean Dandyism

There are alternative postmodernist visions of our ethical future which are less bleak. **Richard Rorty** (b. 1931), the American pragmatist philosopher, suggests that everyone accept and celebrate the postmodernist vision in which any notions of "knowledge" and "objectivity" have vanished. Thinkers and writers must become Romantics who invent their own private "ethics of taste". Postmodern intellectuals should now adopt a playful distrust of large-scale moral truths and Utopian visions, and cultivate an ironically detached attitude towards all human beliefs, including their own.



So Rorty's morality is a private one, not much concerned with group welfare – which probably leads to a kind of political quietism. But if there are to be no more ethical "grand narratives", as Lyotard claims, perhaps playful deconstruction and irony are all that is left? Perhaps.

The Evils of Modernism

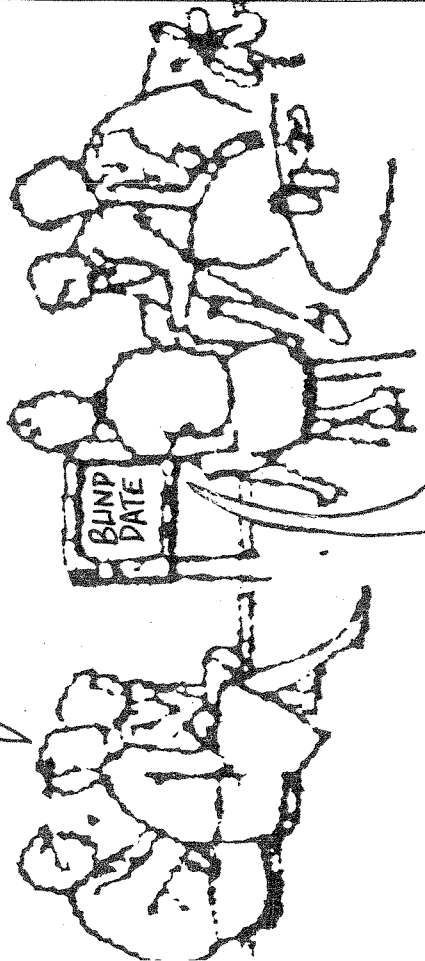
In **Intimations of Postmodernity**, the sociologist **Zygmunt Bauman** (b. 1925) has attempted to make a series of predictions about what a future postmodernist society might be like. Like Lyotard and T.W. **Adorno** (1903-69), Bauman is deeply hostile to the political agendas of **Modernism** and its dream of total order imposed by governments with their naive faith in "progress" and "reason". Modernism has been a "long march to prison", producing this century's "panopticon societies". Totalitarian States (Modernism's most devout disciples), are now revealed to us as ecologically disastrous and morally repugnant.



Moral Philosophers and Legislators

Philosophers and other legislative intellectuals must take some of the blame for the disasters of Modernism. Plato's confident dream of "philosopher kings" with absolute power has been a seductive one. Many moral philosophers, like Kant, believed in the absolute objectivity of "reason" as the source of their legislative authority. This belief in ethical certainty has been infectious – it helped to reinforce the unassailable confidence of governments in their knowledge as to what was best for those they controlled. Postmodernist philosophers no longer have faith in "foundational philosophies" of this kind, and stress the need for a plurality of moral and political beliefs and interpretations.

IT LOOKS INCREASINGLY AS IF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE JUST CAN'T HAVE "FOUNDATIONS" AT ALL, —SOMETHING ESPECIALLY TRUE OF ETHICS.



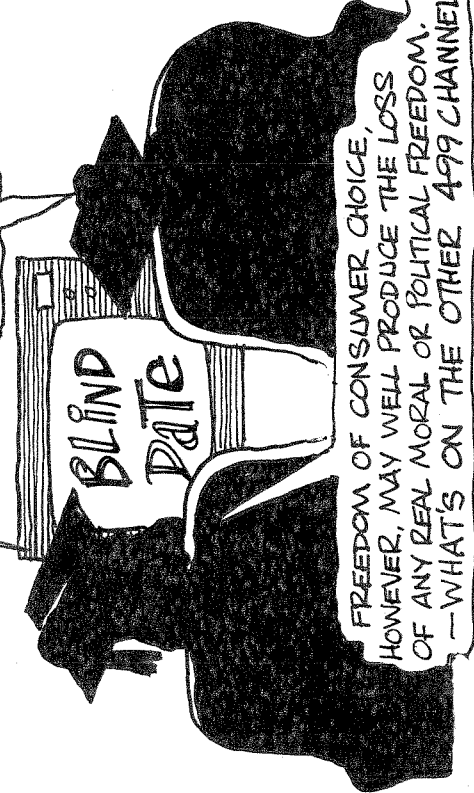
THE LONG DEAD SCEPTICS LIKE ANTISTHENES WERE PROBABLY RIGHT AND SENSIBLE TO ISSUE WARNINGS ABOUT THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF HUMAN CERTAINTY.

Postmodernist Societies

So, we are all now living in a postmodern society. There is no going back. And, as Lyotard has suggested, our postmodern world will become increasingly "atomized" now that the political and intellectual "grand narratives" have lost their credibility. Capitalism and consumerism will probably thrive – a postmodernist society demands variety, something Capitalism is good at providing.

IT MAY WELL BE THROUGH CONSUMERIST SEDUCTION THAT THE STATE WILL CONTROL ITS MEMBERS....

...ALTHOUGH IT WILL DOUBTLESS MAINTAIN MORE OLD-FASHIONED MODERNIST FORMS OF REPRESSIVE CONTROL OVER THE NON-CONSUMERS OF THE UNDERCLASS WHOSE LIVES DO NOT "TRANSCEND THE HORIZON OF SURVIVAL".



FREEDOM OF CONSUMER CHOICE, HOWEVER, MAY WELL PRODUCE THE LOSS OF ANY REAL MORAL OR POLITICAL FREEDOM. —WHAT'S ON THE OTHER 499 CHANNELS?

Because there can no longer be any grand political or moral narratives, ethical debates may centre increasingly on single-issue campaigns in a "no man's land of indifference and apathy", says Bauman.

The Postmodernist Moral Agent

The most important feature of postmodernist ethics, as far as the individual is concerned, is the lack of any universally shared moral values. The philosophers were wrong – there are no objective "translocal" moral truths. This means that there will be more ethical confusion and uncertainty. Moral choices will have to be made without the reassurance of philosophical foundations.



THE POSTMODERN WORLD WILL THEREFORE PRODUCE GREATER MORAL FREEDOMS AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

ETHICS WILL BECOME EVEN MORE EXISTENTIALIST THAN IT ALREADY IS.

MORALITY WILL BE "PRIVATIZED." WE NOW HAVE THE FREEDOM TO SHOP AROUND FOR ANY MORAL SET OF VALUES THAT WE FEEL ARE APPROPRIATE FOR US AT ANY ONE TIME.

The postmodern human condition is, more than anything else, a "state of mind". Anyone who has to make moral choices will find no reliable signposts pointing out the road to righteousness. We will have to rely on constant self-monitoring, self-evaluation and a frequent "sharpening up" of our moral awareness. This means that there will be a healthy emphasis on moral debate and ethical difference, and new questions about our rights and skills as moral agents. There will be risk-taking and uncertainty about moral issues.

A Postmodern Hope: Neo-Tribes

Postmodernism means "the exhilarating freedom to pursue anything and the mind-boggling uncertainty as to what is worth pursuing and in the name of what one should pursue it".

According to Bauman, this kind of personal moral freedom could lead in many directions. It could lead to an open, tolerant society of pragmatic individuals continually engaged in ethical debate. Bauman's fear and loathing of 20th century modernist collectivist Utopias means that he is more positive than some about the opportunities that may be offered to us in a postmodern world.



PEOPLE LIKE TO HUDDLE WITH THOSE WHO SHARE THEIR VALUES AND BELIEFS.

ENEMA-A-GO-GO
0898 741 945

IMMINENT EMERGENCE OF CHRIST UPDATE
0898-196374

CUCUMBER QUORUM
0898-500491

CANAVAN COUNTRYDOWN
0898 247156

SO, THE LACK OF ANY GRAND NARRATIVES WILL PROBABLY PRODUCE A GREATER FRAGMENTATION OF SOCIETY INTO A SERIES OF AUTONOMOUS "IMAGINED COMMUNITIES" OR "NEO-TRIBES", EACH WITH ITS OWN SET OF CHANGING, LOCAL MORAL VALUES

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GLOBAL GOB-IN
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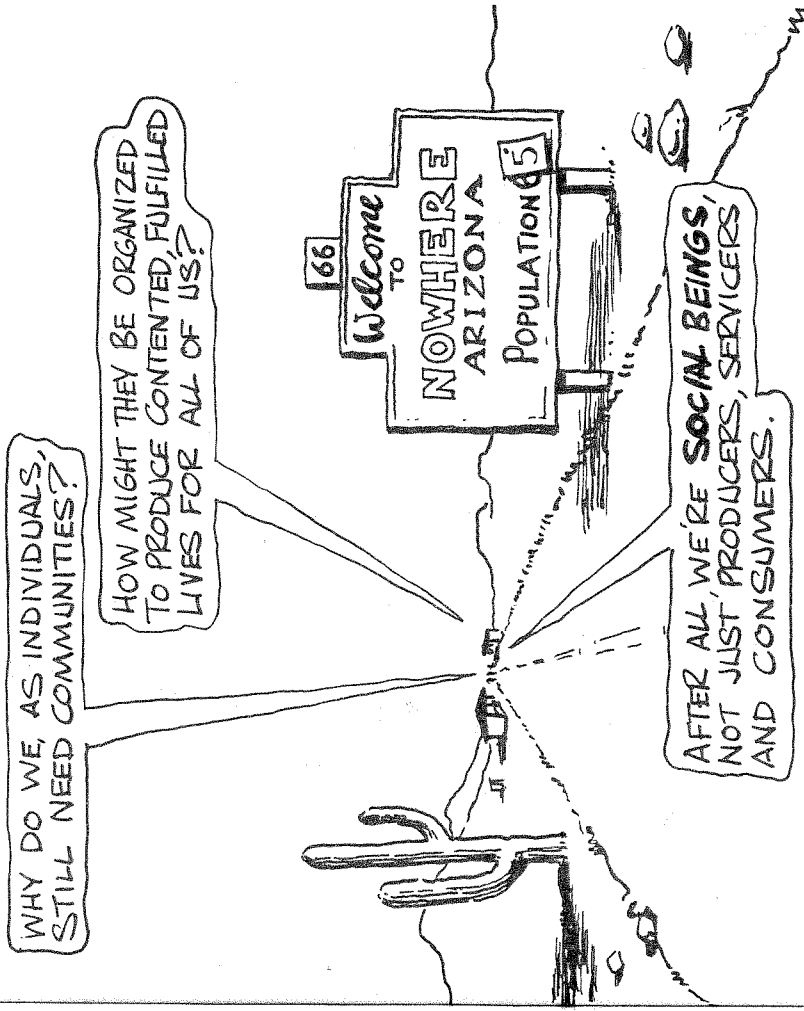
Social Ethics

The humbler aims of moral philosophy in a postmodernist age may concentrate on more modest suggestions.

"Neo-tribes", unlike traditional tribes (whose authority is based on coercion and hereditary power), would consist of voluntary members who share certain values and "language-games" and have a tribal identity based on "self-identification". This vision of a series of small-scale societies has its dangers, though. Small communities with shared sets of moral values tend to exclude, as well as include, and may well become competitive and intolerant.



But whatever the future, we postmoderns should all now be more aware how slippery, undesirable and fictional are all the paths to any ethical rainbowland.

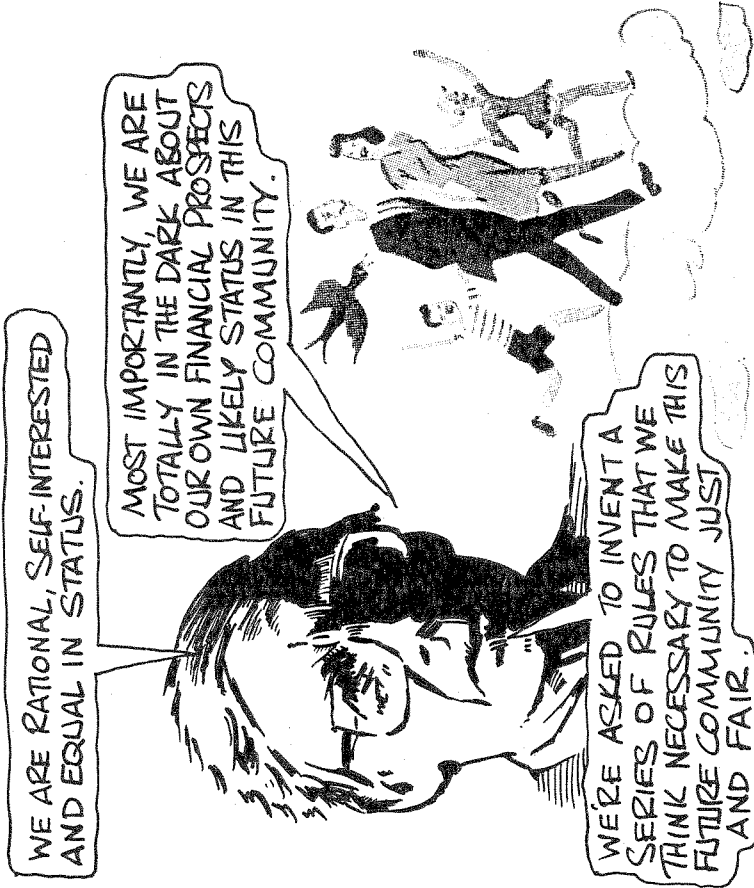


Two philosophers who take this kind of approach are John Rawls and Alasdair MacIntyre.

John Rawls (b. 1921) is a philosopher less interested in grand moral "narratives" and more in what social and legal agreements are necessary to produce a just society. (These "minimum requirements" which ensure a balance between the needs of the individual and society have also been explored by others in "game theory".) If Rawls' philosophy were adopted, then it might help a rather grim-looking late Capitalist future become more humane.

The Future Community: a New Social Contract

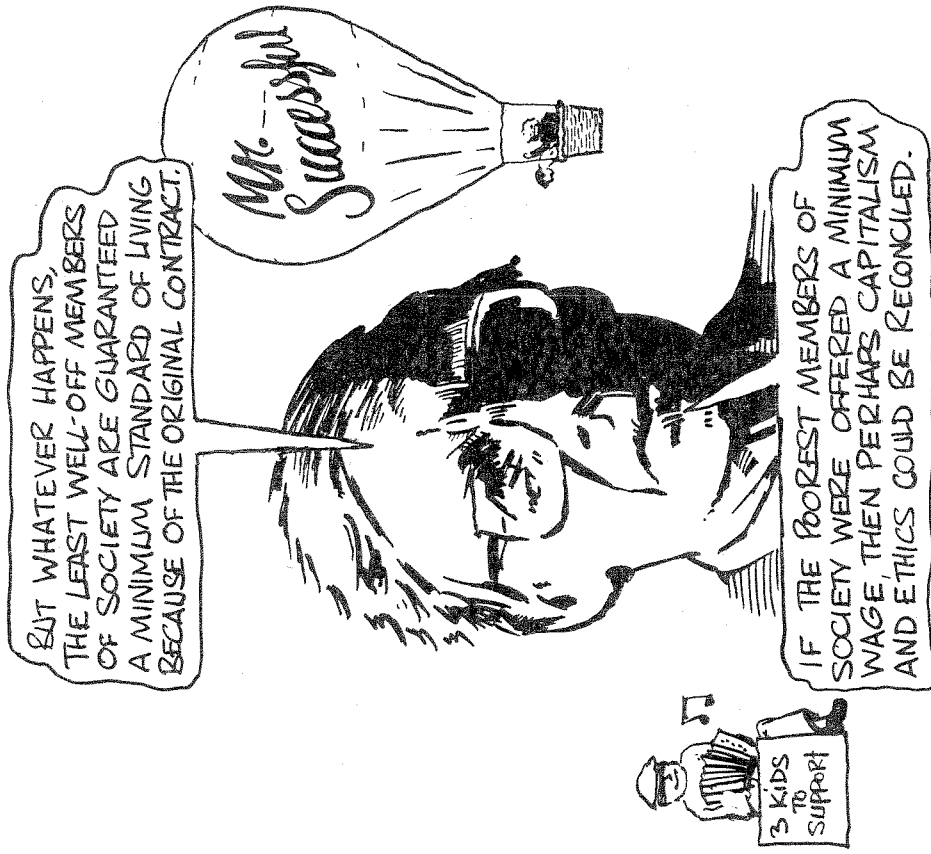
Rawls' **A Theory of Justice** attempts to derive ethics from a new kind of social contract. Rawls asks us to imagine a group of rather odd ahistorical beings who come together to agree on a future community in which they and their children will live.



The "veil of ignorance" ensures that the least privileged members of this society will get some protection, because everyone will want to insure themselves against a possible future life of poverty. Rawls suggests that such a group would emerge with the two principles of "liberty" and "difference". Everyone would want to be free to lead their own lives and yet have different goals in life.

Social Justice

In a few years' time, some dynamic and entrepreneurial individuals would be better off than others.

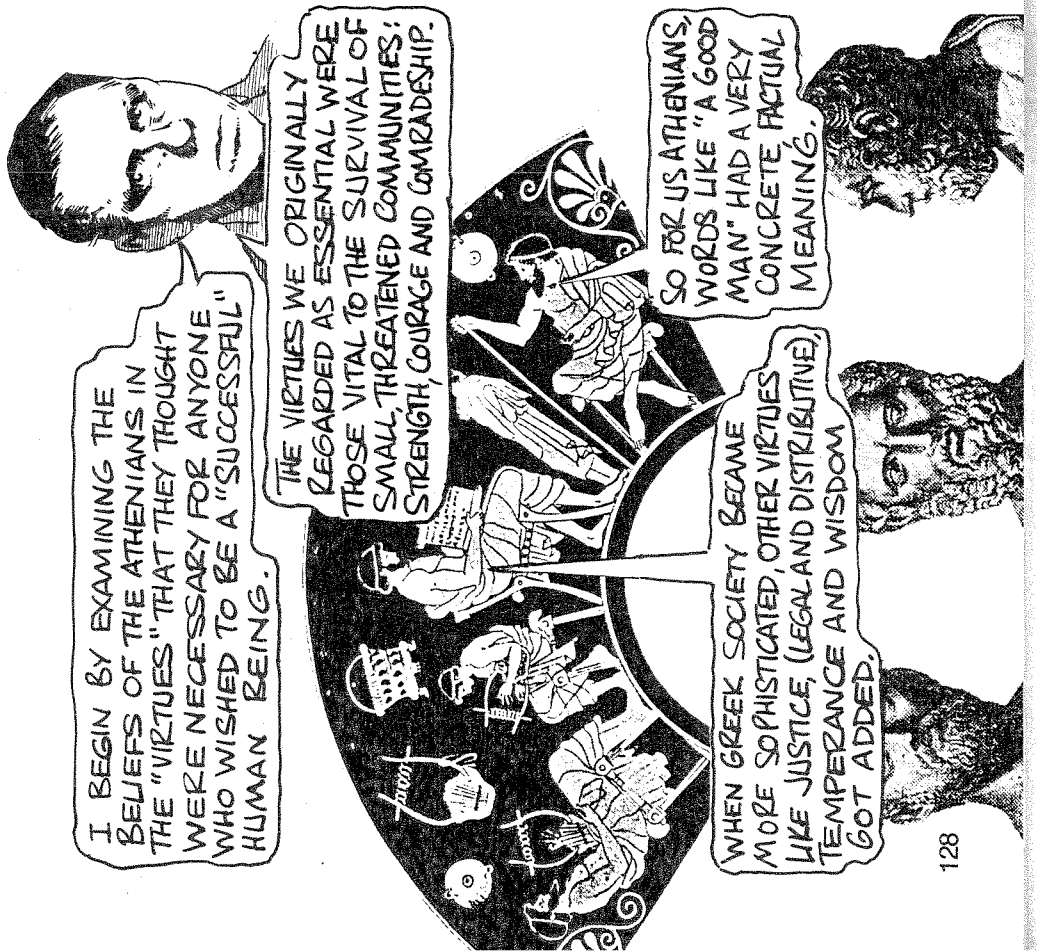


If, however, the majority are offered what is sometimes called "trickle down", then they might feel that the deal is a bad one. Certainly, many people living in Western-style Capitalist economies, seeing their standard of living and job security being rapidly eroded, might welcome a Rawlsian society.

Bring Back Aristotle

For several years now, the philosopher **Alasdair MacIntyre** (b. 1929) has been suggesting that ethics should concentrate less on individuals and their private moral decisions and more on the community and its moral health and welfare. New Aristotelians, like MacIntyre, suggest that ethics should be concentrating more on the people we should be, rather than the things we do. This kind of moral philosophy is usually known as "Virtue Theory".

MacIntyre thinks that modern ethics is in deep trouble. He is critical of much modern ethical philosophy because it just covers the internecine warfare between Deontologists and Utilitarians, or it is unsympathetically analytic and theoretical. MacIntyre's approach to ethics is historical.



Why Has Ethics Become a Mess?

According to MacIntyre, this kind of Greek moral certainty has been eroded by sceptics like Hume and Ayer. Kant made morality a cold and unsympathetic exercise in reason, and the Utilitarians reduced it to a set of pseudo-scientific calculations that don't work. All such doctrines, whether "Enlightenment" or "Victorian", are also wrong to think that their particular ethics are "objective", when they are peculiarly "local".

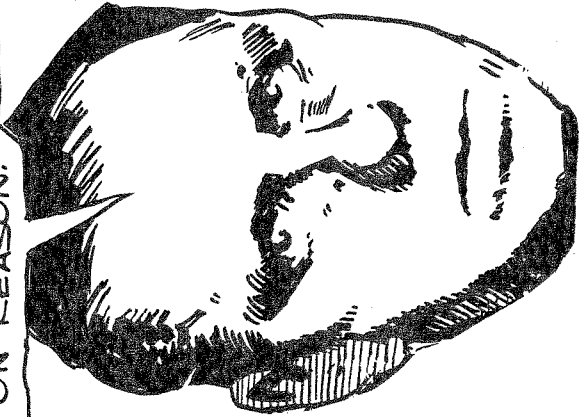


We live, according to MacIntyre, in a world of "bureaucrats, aesthetes" and "therapists".

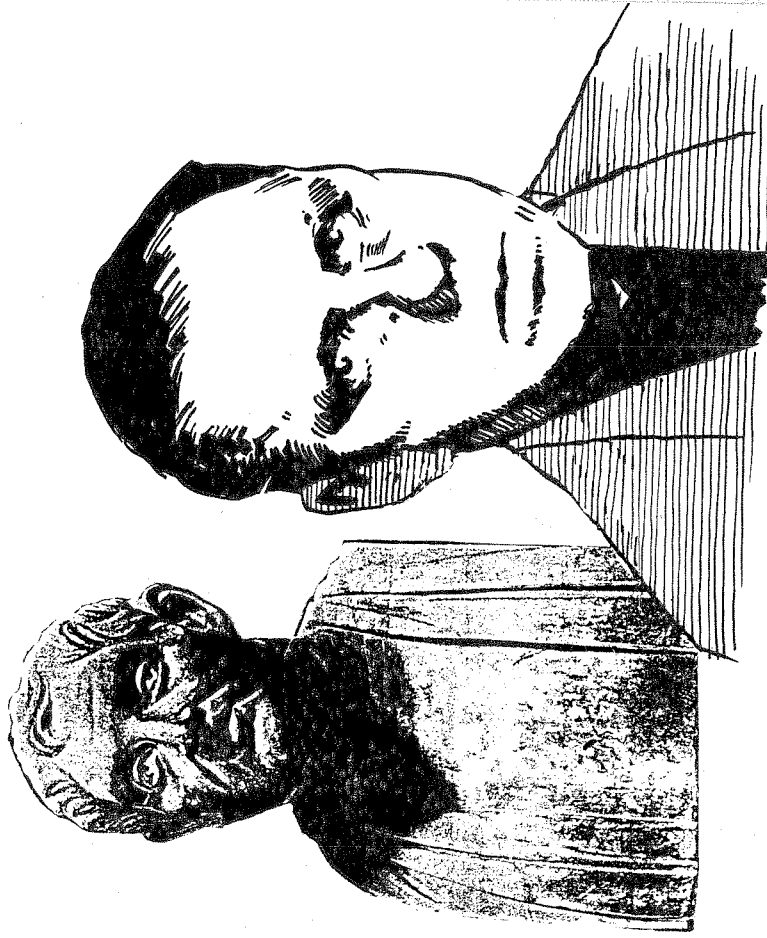
Hope in Traditions

It's a pessimistic view of ethical and philosophical history. MacIntyre does stress, though, that there is still hope. Human beings are unstopably communitarian – at work, in sports, in charity work and in all forms of human activities. Communal life is held together by traditions and by those dispositions or virtues that groups encourage in individual members.

ALL MORALITY IS THE RESULT OF TRADITION. IT IS FUTILE TO THINK ONE CAN EXIST AS SOME KIND OF "PURE INDIVIDUAL" OR FORMULATE SOME KIND OF TRADITIONLESS AND TIMELESS MORAL SYSTEM BASED ON "REASON".



He suggests that what we need is a new kind of ethical philosophy. One of Aristotle's central ideas is that we should habituate people into having good dispositions towards others, so that moral behaviour becomes almost instinctive, rather than depending on moral "systems". MacIntyre is a bit vague about what these dispositions or virtues are that would produce "moral behaviour", although he does suggest that the "wisdom of the ages" would tell us.



The State We're In

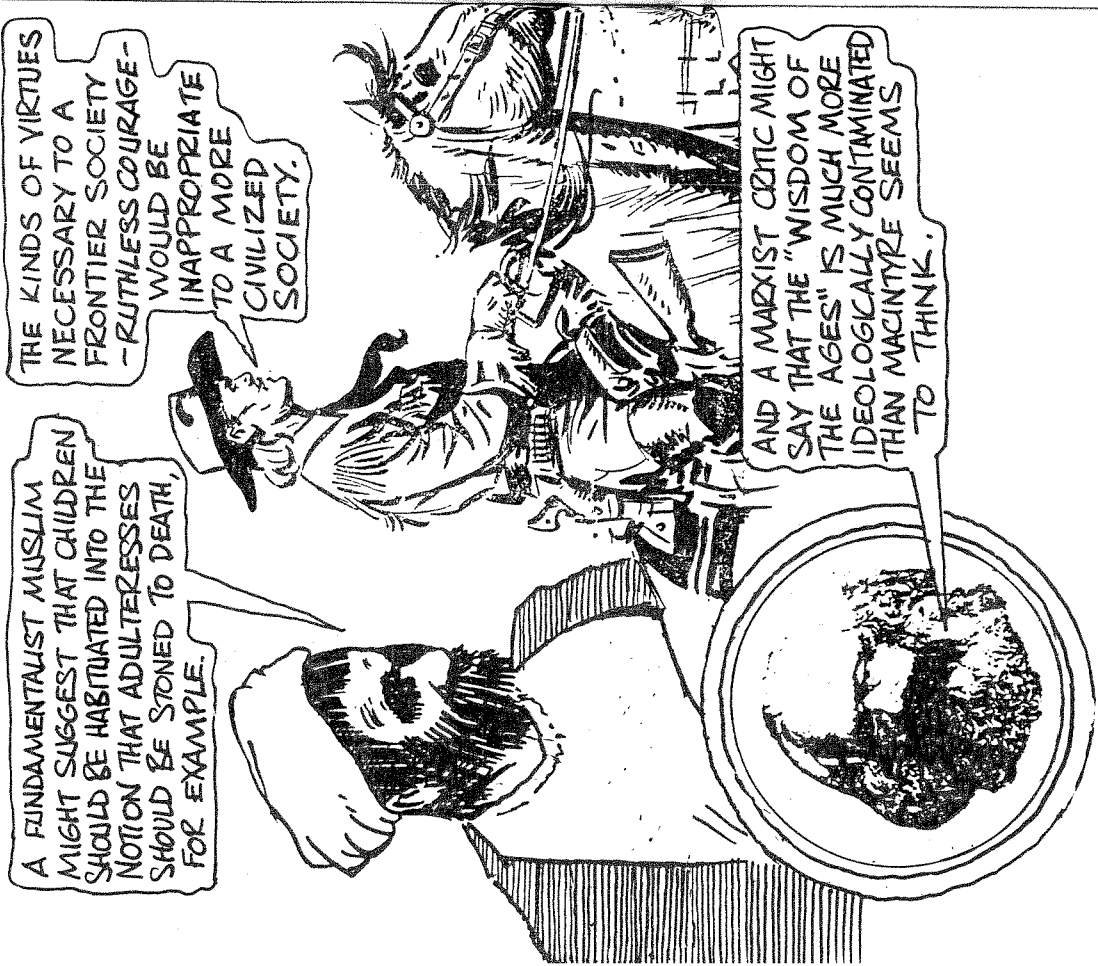
There is certainly a growing belief amongst many moral philosophers and political commentators that MacIntyre and Aristotle may be on to something important here. If, as the millennium approaches, we believe that both society and personal morality are breaking down, then perhaps philosophers should examine more deeply the connections between the two. **Will Hutton's** recent book on "the State of the Nation" is clearly enthusiastic about this kind of communitarianism:

"What is needed is the development of a new conception of citizenship. Britain must...equip itself with a constitution that permits a new form of economic, social and political citizenship. Economic citizenship will open the way to the reform of financial and corporate structures; social citizenship will give us the chance of constructing an intelligent welfare state based on active solidarity; and political citizenship opens the way to political pluralism and genuine cooperation."

The State We're In, Will Hutton, 1995

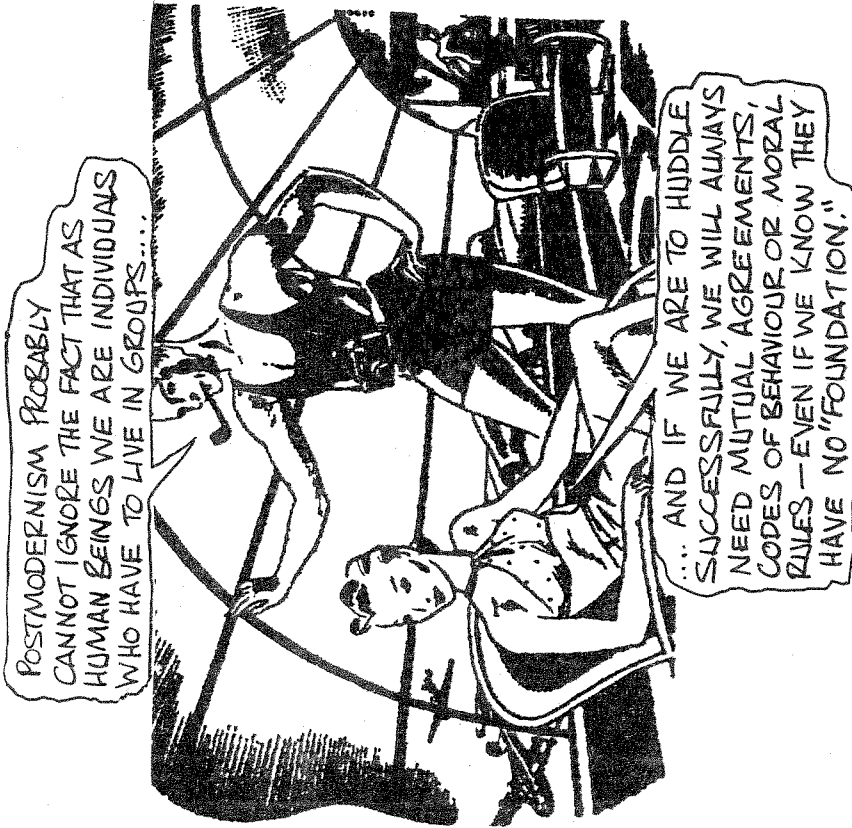
What Are the Virtues?

There is at least one major problem which the new Aristotelians have to solve. What will the virtues be? Do virtues exist that we can derive from the "wisdom of the ages" and consequently encourage? Other postmodernist philosophers would be very doubtful of such a "search". Different cultures would undoubtedly insist on different "virtues" that they felt were appropriate for their members.



And Where is Postmodernism Going?

It's still too early to say with any confidence what postmodernist ethics will be. It may not exist as something we would normally recognize as "ethics" at all. At the moment it looks as if it may be a rather odd combination of the sort of corrosive scepticism of the Ancient Greek Cynics and the healthy pragmatism of Aristotle. It seems wise in its insistence that there are no grand moral truths. Postmodernists seem sensible to stress that we should be wary of philosophers and politicians who claim both that such truths exist and that they personally have some kind of access to them.



Aristotle always maintained that ethics was just a branch of politics and not metaphysics, and writers as diverse as Rawls, MacIntyre and Bauman seem to agree.

Time for a New Feminist Ethics

Some feminist philosophers, like **Martha Nussbaum** (b. 1947), believe that it is men who like to invent elaborate abstract formal "systems" which they then try to impose on the messier world of human beings and their moral problems.

BUT ARE THERE SPECIFICALLY FEMALE "VIRTUES"?

THE DOMINANT PATRIARCHAL VIEW ABOUT THE TRUE "NATURE" OF WOMEN FOR MANY CENTURIES HAS BEEN THAT THEY ARE MORE INTUITIVE, IRRATIONAL, GENTLE, PASSIVE, SELFLESS AND SYMPATHETIC THAN MEN.

...M-m-m-m-m-what's cooking?



THESE PERCEIVED QUALITIES HAVE USUALLY RESTRICTED WOMEN TO THE DOMESTIC SPHERE.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) attacked this view of female "nature" as an ideological construct whose primary function is to legitimize male supremacy in public life.

THERE IS AN OBVIOUS DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE BIOLOGICAL "SEX" OF WOMEN AND THEIR SOCIALLY AND CULTURALLY DETERMINED "GENDER."

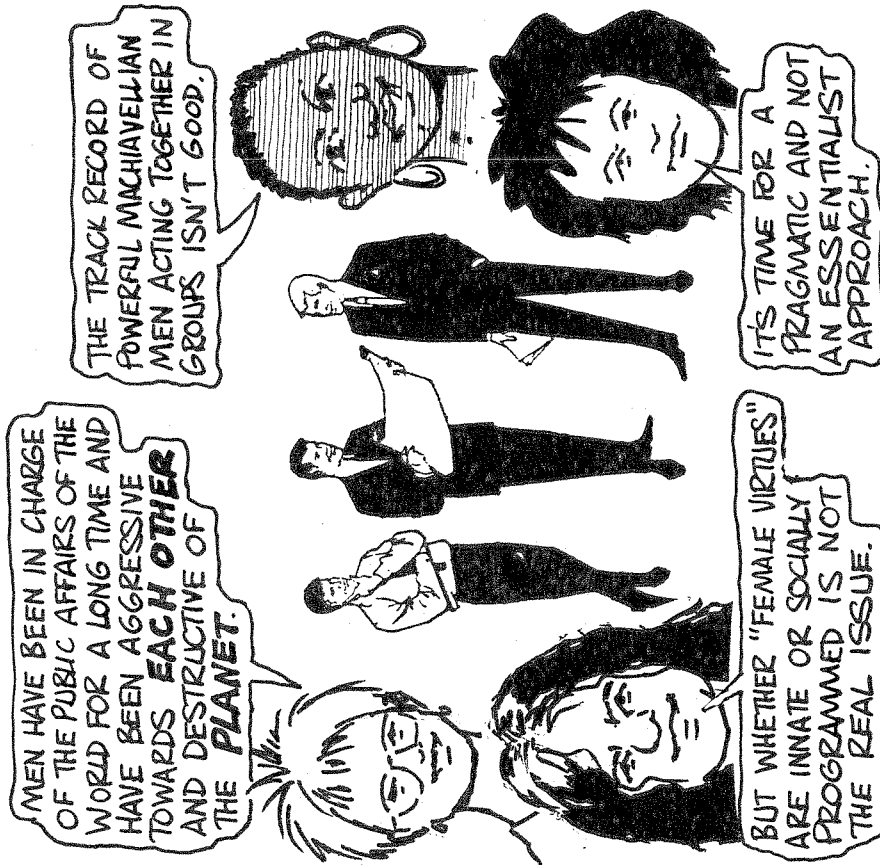


SO THE DOCTRINE OF AN ESSENTIALIST "FEMALE NATURE" IS A PROBLEM FOR ANY FEMINIST ETHIC, IF "FEMALE NATURE" IS REALLY A SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONSTRUCT.

Julia Kristeva (b. 1941) stresses that there is no such thing as "essential woman"; primarily because of postmodernist doubts about the very notion of "identity" itself.

Private and Public Spheres

But some feminists believe there may be something attractive about these traditional gender "virtues" entering the sphere of public life.



They argue that some of the traditional "female virtues" of cooperation and caring that operate in the "private sphere" should be given a much higher priority in the brutal and ruthless masculine "public sphere".

Sensible Jake and Sensitive Amy

One good example of the different "feminist" approach to moral dilemmas was exhibited by "Amy" in Lawrence Kohlberg's famous study of moral development, the **Philosophy of Moral Development**, 1981.

Two children, "Jake" and "Amy", were presented with a moral dilemma.



What did sophisticated Jake (an act Utilitarian), say?

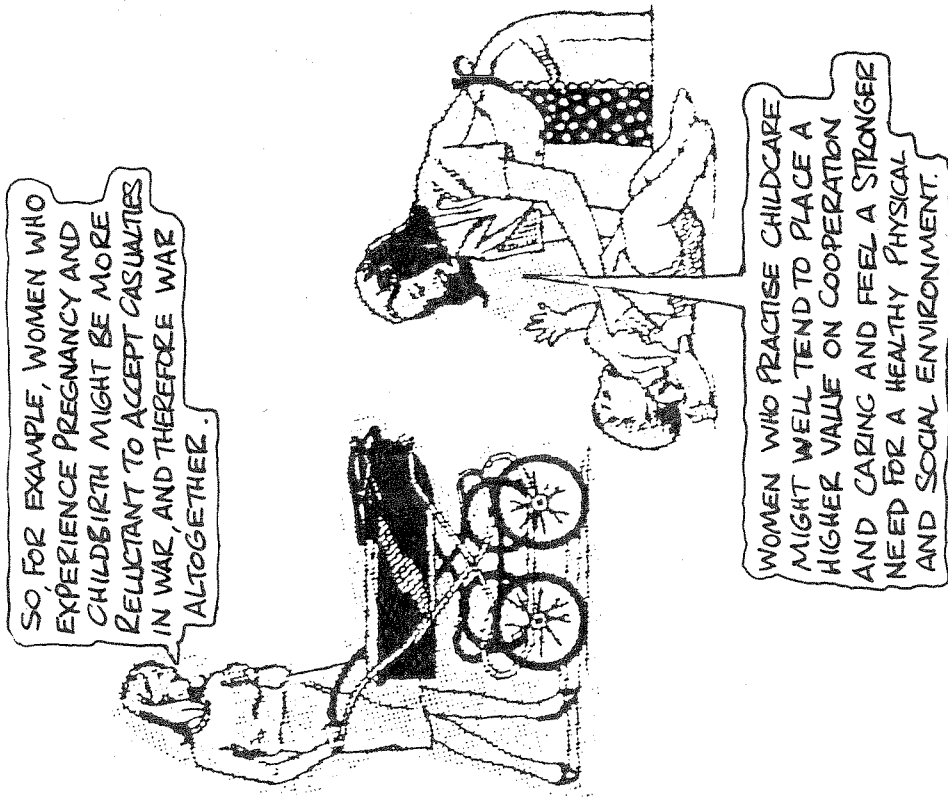
Amy, surprisingly, had another answer.

So, perhaps Jake is wrong to believe that moral problems can be "solved" by one solitary individual aggressively applying a moral "system". The inference is that women look at specifics of the relationships and emotions involved in moral dilemmas, and then try to negotiate.

But it's still not that clear that there are predictable differences in the ways that men and women approach moral issues. To suggest that women are less rational and more "intuitive" could easily be depicted as a weakness rather than a strength. Many philosophers believe that one central feature of ethics is its universality, and would worry about the notion of "negotiation" in moral dilemmas. (Suppose "Amy" isn't very good at persuasive negotiation, for instance?)

Different Moral Priorities

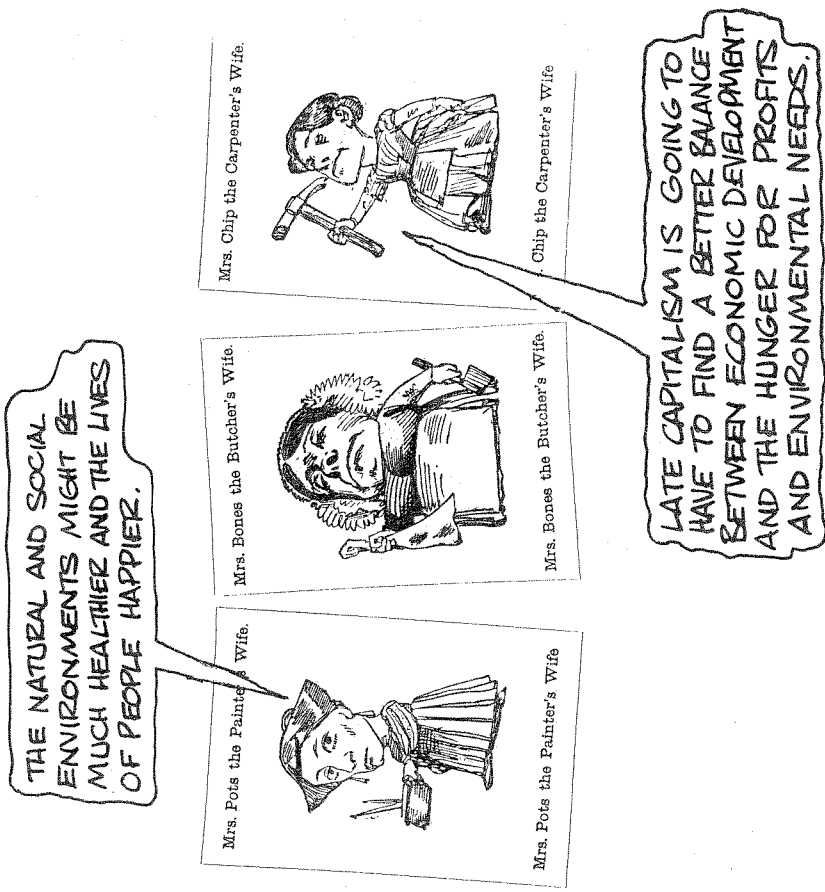
Perhaps a better way of looking at this difference is not to claim that women think about moral issues in different ways, but to show how their moral priorities are different.



But child-rearing practices are as much cultural as "biological", and it is difficult to see how they could be used as a basis for a radical new set of universal, gender-neutral ethical "virtues" that could be encouraged in everyone.

S.H.E.

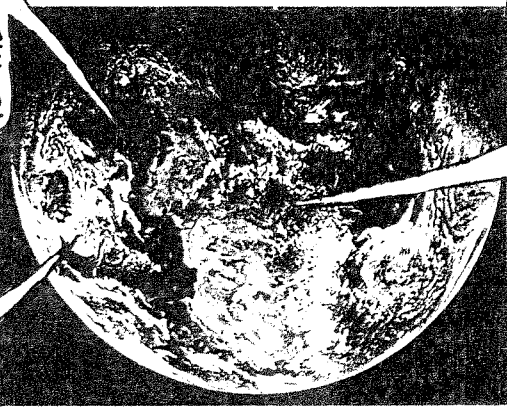
It is a truth universally unacknowledged that moral doctrines and systems have all emerged from societies which place women in a subordinate position. If those concerns and activities that have been traditionally associated with women were given a superior status to those traditionally associated with men, then moral priorities might become very different.



The answer might well be a S.H.E. (Sane, Humane, Ecological) society.

Environmental Ethics

One moral question really unique to our own century is that of our relationship to the natural environment. This question has arisen partly as a result of the startling human population explosion of recent years and the alarming growth of new industrialized societies, first in the West and now in the Far East. Both have produced pollution of the planet on an unprecedented scale.



MANY LIFE FORMS HAVE BEEN EXTINGUISHED, THE HABITATS OF OTHERS POISONED AND DESTROYED.


THE INTEGRITY OF THE BIOSPHERE ITSELF IS THREATENED BY GLOBAL WARMING AND DAMAGE TO THE OZONE LAYER.

OUR SPECIES IS PROLIFIC IN NUMBER AND MIGHTY IN ACHIEVEMENTS, BUT NOW URGENTLY NEEDS A NEW ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC.

We need to agree about our behaviour towards our planet, even more than we need detailed scientific information about the damage we are doing. We have to find alternative economic, political and cultural ideologies which are very unlike those we currently support.

Anthropocentric Ethics

At present no one is wholly sure what "environmental ethics" means or looks like. Traditional ethical doctrines have always been selfishly anthropocentric.




I WAS ONLY EVER INTERESTED IN HUMAN POTENTIAL AND HAPPINESS.

OUR DUTIES ARE EXCLUSIVELY TOWARDS OTHER MEMBERS OF OUR OWN SPECIES.

LIBERALISMS HAVE ALWAYS PRIORITIZED HUMAN HAPPINESS.

WHAT WE NEED IS SOME KIND OF ETHIC WHICH IS LESS SELFISHLY HUMAN AND MORE "HOLISTIC."

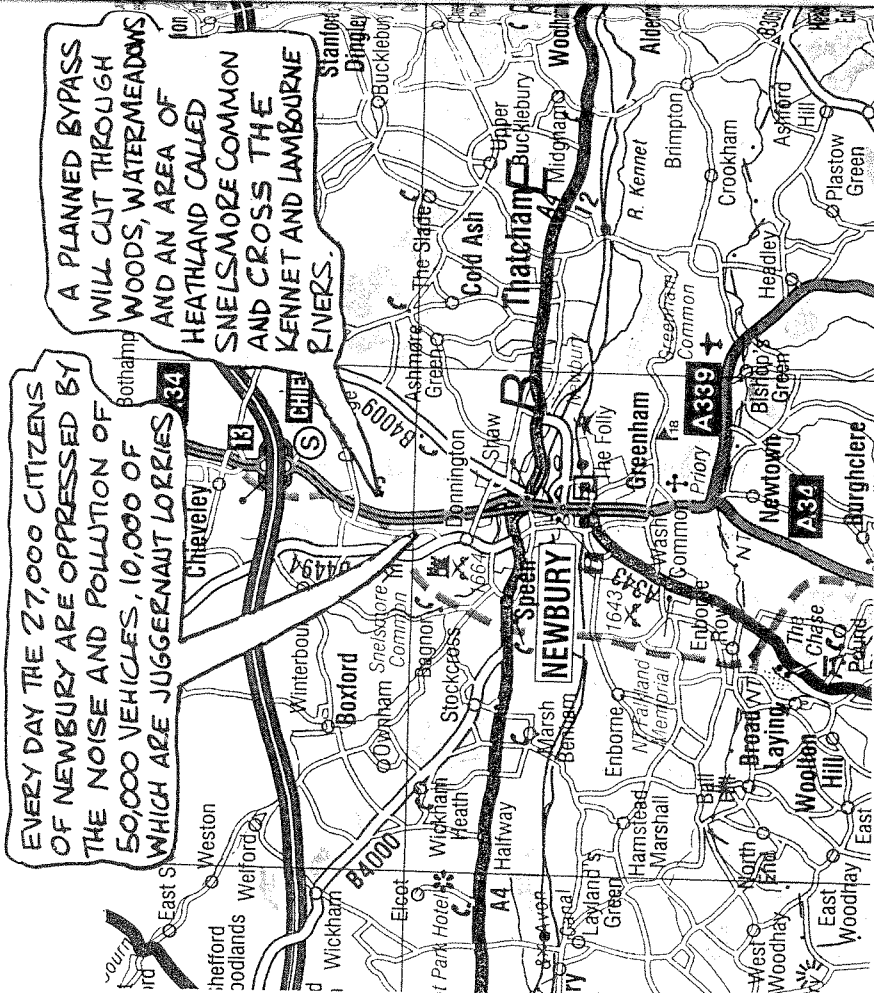
It would have to be able to arbitrate between a complex series of empirical planetary facts and human ideologies and values. There is not much moral philosophy we can plunder from the past to help us.



PERHAPS BUDDHISM'S EMPHASIS ON SIMPLICITY AND FRUGALITY AS INTRINSIC VALUES MAY BE A USEFUL START.

The Newbury Case

Few people now believe that material wealth and jobs must be pursued relentlessly, whatever the environmental cost. Governments may be more ethically challenged than ordinary people in this respect. The current British government is still heavily committed to the "car culture" although it is at last beginning to recognize the damage that cars and lorries do to the countryside and to the lives of citizens in urban environments.



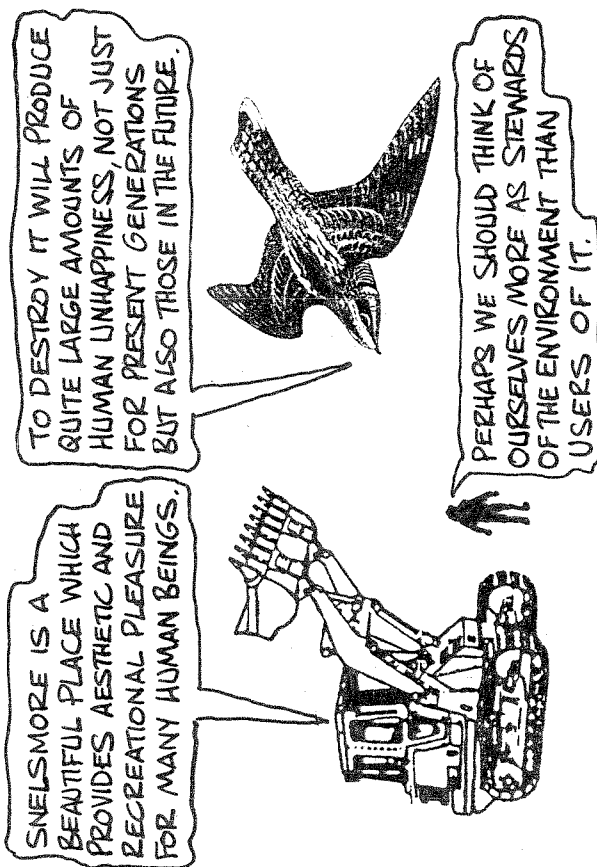
The common and the rivers are "Sites of Special Scientific Interest". The new road will probably destroy or severely damage a rare local colony of nightjars and there is even a slight chance that, by diverting one of the rivers, a rare species of river snail will become extinct.

Does it Matter?

A Utilitarian Argument

One common ethical and environmental argument is the human-centred Utilitarian one.

This familiar Utilitarian kind of argument is powerful but still places only human happiness at its centre. Nightjars and trees have moral value only insofar as they give human beings pleasure.

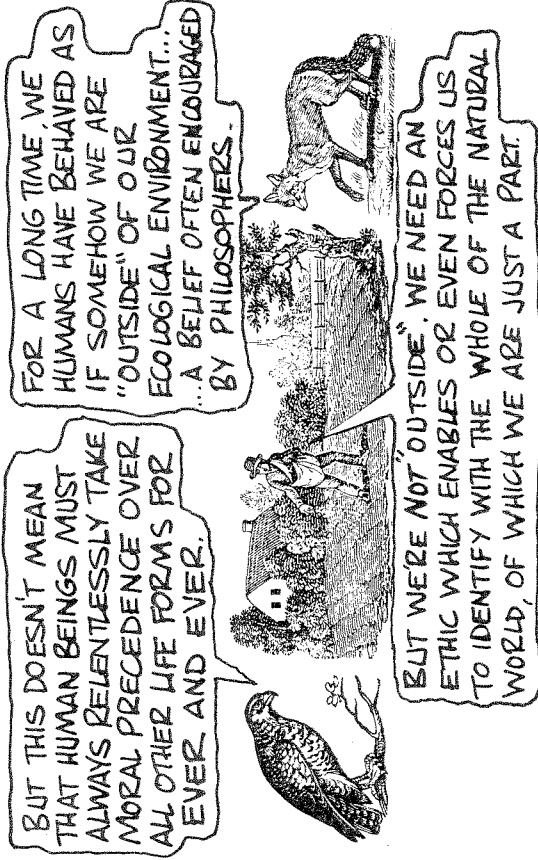


Another kind of ethical-environmental argument allows for the moral rights of nightjars and badgers to pursue their own "interests", which they can no longer do if their habitat is utterly destroyed. This might be called the "enlightened Utilitarian" argument, which recognizes the intrinsic value of the sentient and conscious lives of species other than ourselves. This argument would stress how the animals' habitat is a need, whereas our human motorway is only a want.

But what about non-sentient entities like trees or rocks? An extremely enlightened and rather unorthodox Utilitarian might claim that trees also have "interests" – they need an environment in which to flourish and be healthy and this would be destroyed or damaged by any pollution of the immediate environment.

We Are Not Outsiders

This failure of traditional Utilitarian arguments to produce moral answers suggests to some that we need a newer, more complex kind of ecological ethic which is more radically "holistic". It is going to be difficult for us to grasp this new kind of ethic, because it does require a considerable effort of the imagination, and a readiness on our part to reject our own immediate material desires in favour of something remoter and grander. Traditional ethics doesn't account for this, as an inevitably human-centred activity. As far as we know, nightjars and trees don't go in for it.



We are members of a complex biosphere whose stability, health and integrity it is in our interest to preserve and not to threaten. An environmental ethic will have to stress how we must see ourselves as products and perhaps partners of this planet, and not controllers and exploiters of it.

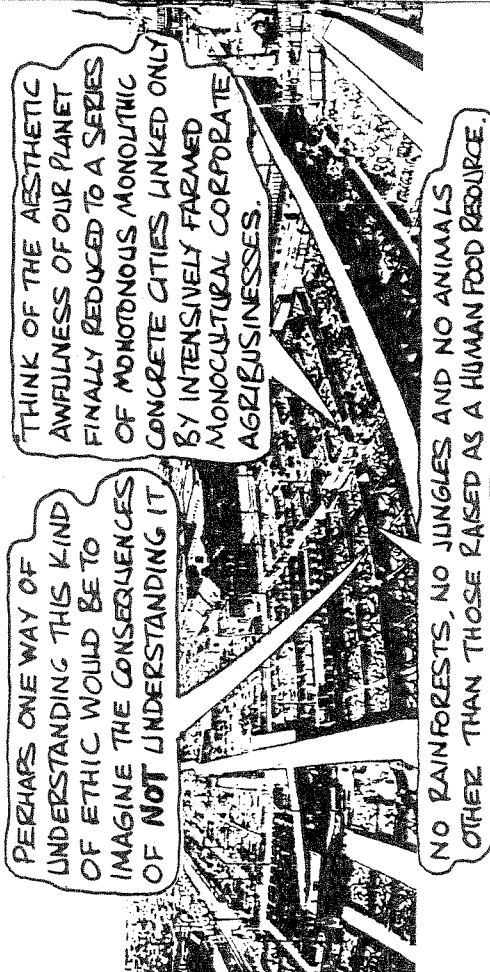
James Lovelock's now famous "Gaia" hypothesis states that our host planet is itself a huge, ruthlessly self-regulating biological organism. This means that it is not committed to the preservation of human life at all. So, it may be very much in our own interest to convince our planetary host that we are worth keeping on as environmentally conscientious house-guests.

HOWEVER, FOR MANY PHILOSOPHERS, AT THIS POINT UTILITARIAN-STYLE MORAL ARGUMENTS SEEM TO FOUNDER.

IT'S DIFFICULT TO SEE HOW TREES OR ROCKS CAN HAVE "INTERESTS" IF THEY HAVE NO WAY OF "EXPERIENCING" THE WORLD.

Holistic Ethics

A Utilitarian would have no problem in admitting plants or even soil, rocks and water to the moral sphere, but really only because of the sentient life forms they support. A holistic ethic would grant moral importance to non-sentient entities like rocks and trees on very different grounds, by citing their intrinsic values of "diversity", "interrelatedness" and "ecological richness", all values independent of their usefulness to us or other sentient life forms.



To produce such a planet might be thought of as wicked as well as unimaginative. Perhaps, to be fully human, we need areas of wilderness so that we can occasionally escape from a wholly manufactured environment where all we ever see is other humans.

ETHICS AND ANIMALS

The Libellous Philosophers

Animals, on Snelsmore Common and elsewhere, are mobile sentient organisms – a class that includes everything from amoebae to chimpanzees. We eat them, use them as unpaid workers, as transport, as entertainment and as experimental tools. Most philosophers have done them no favours. Aristotle thought that animals often mimic what human beings do ...

BUT THEY'RE NOT REALLY "DOING" THESE THINGS BECAUSE THERE'S NO THOUGHT "BEHIND" WHAT THEY'RE DOING.

Descartes maintained that animals were machines that could neither think nor feel pain ...

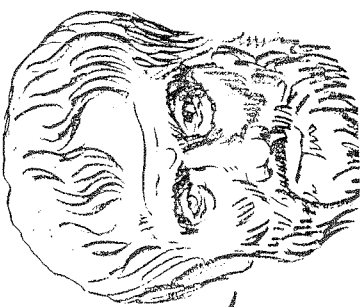
AN ANIMAL SCREAMING IN PAIN IS LIKE A CHIMING CLOCK.



Wittgenstein maintained that thinking is impossible without any kind of language.



SO ANIMALS CANNOT BE "CONSCIOUS."



Kant thought that it was wrong to be cruel to animals.

SOLELY BECAUSE THIS CRUELTY MIGHT BRUTALIZE INDIVIDUALS AND CONSEQUENTLY MAKE THEM CRUEL TO HUMANS TOO.



Wittgenstein maintained that thinking is impossible without any kind of language.

Animal Rights

Many animal activists think that animals have moral or natural "rights" that must be respected. "Rights talk" is usually used by the weak to defend themselves against the powerful. The "weak" can be ordinary citizens fighting against authoritarian governments, minorities attempting to defend themselves against hostile majorities or, in this case, the defenders of animals who wish to stop animals from being mistreated. Moral or legal rights are usually backed up by the underlying doctrine of contracts. Citizens will agree to obey reasonable government laws, if the government does not become tyrannical.

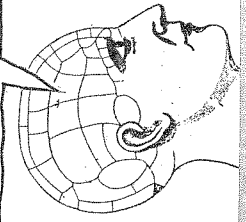
BOTH SIDES THEREFORE GAIN BENEFICIAL RIGHTS AND OBLIGATORY DUTIES.

BUT ANIMALS CAN'T MAKE CONTRACTS!



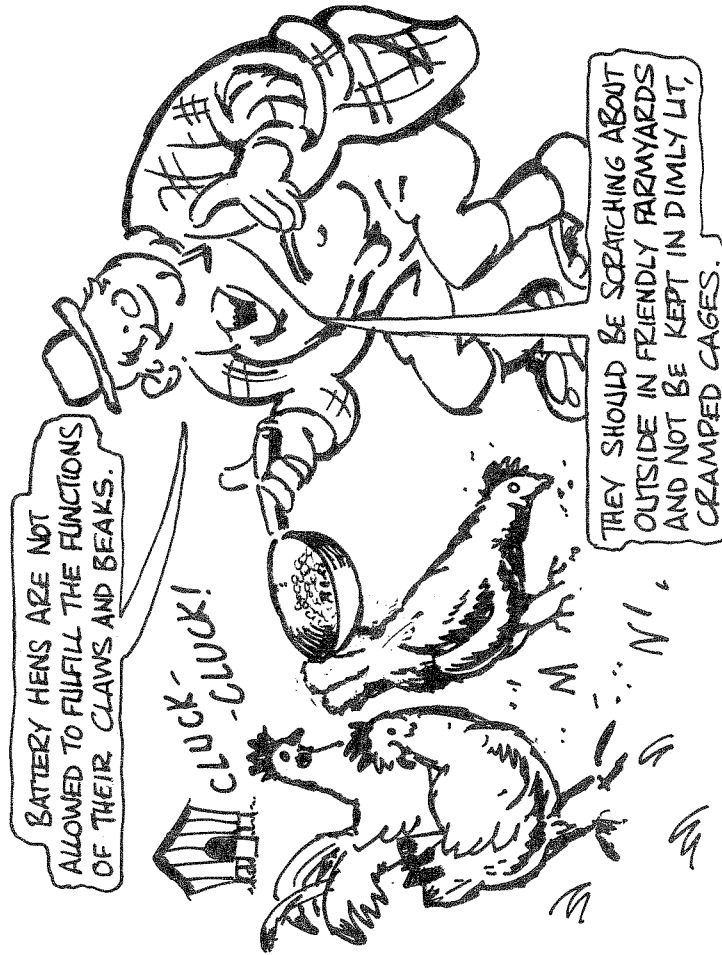
BECAUSE AN ELEPHANT CAN'T MAKE CLEAR VERBALLY WHAT ITS INTERESTS ARE, THEN IT HAS NO RIGHTS.

"RIGHTS TALK" DOESN'T SEEM TO HELP ANIMALS MUCH EITHER.



Can We Prove That Animals Have Rights?

There have been attempts to circumvent this problem of "rights and contracts". You can say that human defenders of animals make contracts on their behalf — just as adults do for inarticulate, immature infants. You can claim that animals have innate rights, but this is rather hard to prove. You can claim that such rights are intuitively self-evident to any rational being — a claim that might well be countered by any battery chicken farmer. More convincingly, you can make the teleological claim that animals have certain kinds of functions to which they have rights.

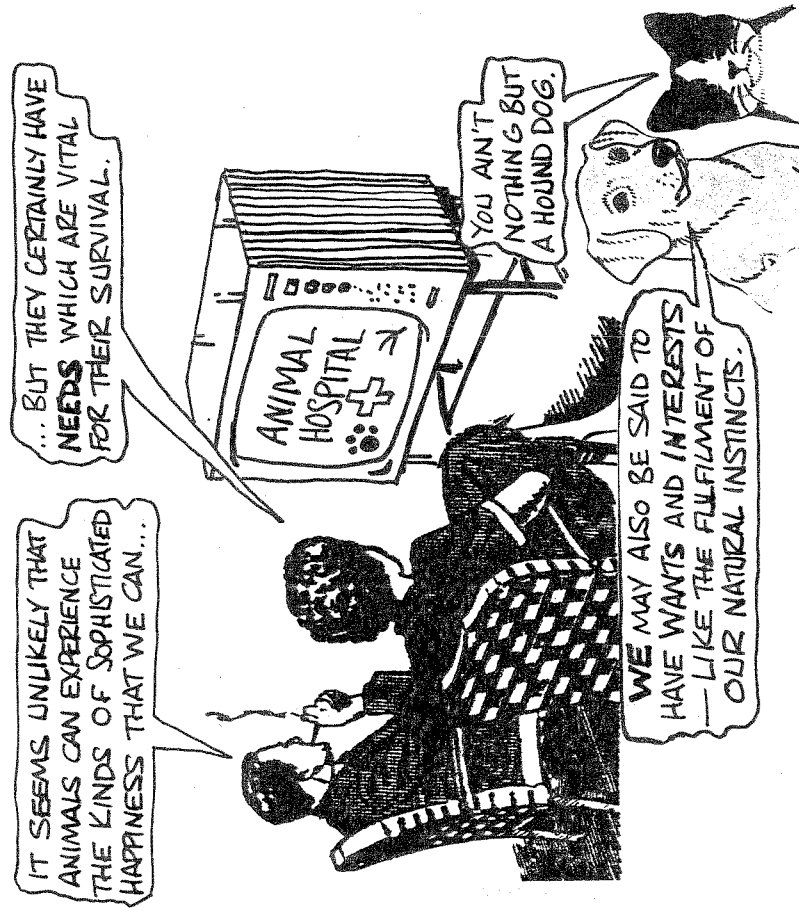


This argument claims that functions and rights have the same meaning, but they don't really. A man can have the correctly designed organs necessary to fertilize other female human beings, but this doesn't give him the right to do so.

The Utilitarian Argument

On the whole, it seems best to abandon all moral or natural "rights talk". Legal rights are much easier to defend, simply because we know exactly what we are referring to. Either it is illegal to tear badgers to pieces with dogs or it isn't, in which case the badger has certain minimal rights. Whether badgers actually do have enough protection in law is another matter.

Another philosophical way of defending animals is the Utilitarian argument. As we now know, Utilitarians are in favour of producing the greatest happiness for the greatest number.



Getting its needs, wants and interests satisfied probably makes an animal happy in its own way.

Animals and Pain

We can't prove that animals experience pain, but then we can't prove that other human beings apart from ourselves do either. Nevertheless, we would be surprised if they didn't.

ANIMALS ALSO MAKE NOISES WHICH SIGNAL DISTRESS AND THEY HAVE SIMILAR NERVOUS SYSTEMS TO OUR OWN...

...SO IT WOULD SEEM SENSIBLE TO PROCEED IN THE BELIEF THAT THEY DO FEEL PAIN.



THE BELIEF THAT ANIMALS EXPERIENCE PAIN TO A LESSER DEGREE THAN SENSITIVE HUMANS IS ALSO RATHER SUSPECT.

THAT WAS AN ARGUMENT USED BY SOME AMERICANS ABOUT THEIR BLACK SLAVES.

Animals are not things. Morally, they count because they are sentient. Human beings have the nasty habit of denying justice to those unimaginatively perceived of as "outsiders". For the Athenians, anyone who was not Athenian was of no moral importance. Then reluctantly some Athenians included all those who spoke Greek.

IN THE 18TH CENTURY, SOME ENLIGHTENED EUROPEANS THOUGHT THAT PERHAPS ALL HUMAN BEINGS DESERVED TO BE TREATED EQUALLY.



FINALLY, I SUGGESTED THAT ALL SENTIENT BEINGS DESERVED SOME FORM OF MORAL CONSIDERATION.

RIGHT ON!

The major Utilitarian breakthrough was to change the way of looking at the animals issue. Rationalist philosophers argued about the reasoning and linguistic abilities of animals in an attempt to show whether they had rights or not. Bentham said: "The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?"

But not many Utilitarians think that animals have exactly the same moral status as human beings. They usually maintain that human life and happiness is more complex and so usually takes precedence over animal happiness.

Animal Experiments

A Utilitarian is obliged to recognize the reality and nastiness of animal suffering when deciding the "right" and "wrong" of animal experiments. Every year, millions of animals throughout the world are blinded, burnt, paralyzed, electrocuted, given cancer, brain-damaged and then killed.



Behaviour normally regarded as loathsome is accepted if it is performed by people in white coats with a specific scientific agenda. Some scientists will maintain that it is always permissible for human beings to protect themselves at the expense of the suffering of other species – even if the danger stems from a new brand of cosmetic!

Some animal activists will claim that animals are our moral equals and that to experiment on powerless four-legged conscripts is always wrong. They will point out that animals are often a poor substitute for humans – but at the same time paradoxically stress how closely matched is the DNA between us and many primates.

The Conscientious Scientist and Some Possible Moral Guidelines

A Utilitarian scientist who had the interests of humans and animals at heart might say something like this ...

Experiments on animals can be justified on medical grounds only. Any scientist who wishes to experiment on animals must say clearly what medical benefits his research will produce. The scientist must prove to us that his research could not have been performed in any other way (such as by a use of human cell cultures, demographic surveys, computer modelling and so on).



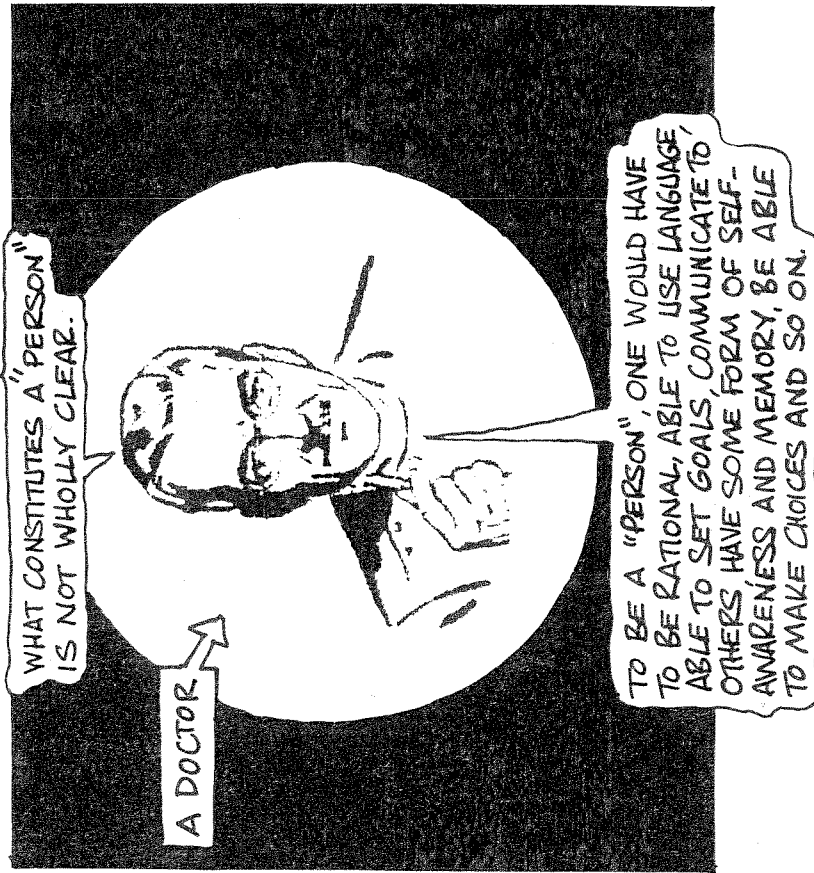
The scientist must convince us that the benefits of the research exceed the suffering caused to the animals used. (So you might justify the deaths of 1,000 mice if you saved the lives of 100,000 children with the results of your research.)

The scientist must declare openly that he would be prepared to conduct the same experiments on brain-damaged infants. (This tests that he is very convinced of the seriousness of what he is doing, and that he is not "species-ist" – treating animals as things.)

Some scientists would object that such stringent rules might stop all "pure" research. Others would say that the price animals have to pay to satisfy human curiosity is too high.

The Persons Argument

The "persons argument" is different. The word "person" is employed by philosophers to avoid the ambiguity and confusion caused by words like "human being" in moral argument. When someone says that a coma patient who has been unconscious for three years is no longer a "human being", they don't mean that the patient has gradually changed into a giraffe, but that they are no longer a "person" or someone with a biography.



Although we would probably consider someone who had lost their memory and refused to speak still to be a person, someone who had none of these attributes we would probably consider not to be. (Perhaps because they were in a terminal coma.)

Are Chimpanzees Persons?

Using such criteria, we would consider the fictional E.T. a "person" even though E.T. clearly isn't human. More importantly, many people would include some higher mammals – great apes, whales, dolphins and others. There is some good evidence to show that some great apes are self-aware, rational, planners, and even language-users in a very limited sort of way.

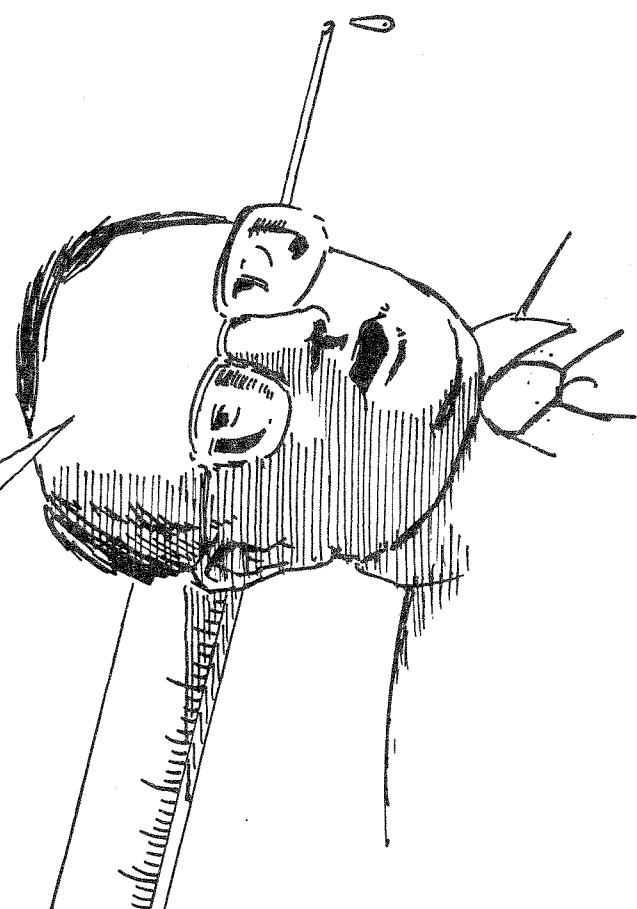


If we emphasize the fact that as humans we are different from animals only in degree and not in kind, then perhaps there might be a different set of attitudes to our relationship with them. There is now a strong campaign to give the great apes full human rights for these reasons.

ETHICS AND EUTHANASIA

The Case of Dr Cox and Mrs Boyes

In 1992, Dr Nigel Cox was sent to trial for ending the life of Mrs Lillian Boyes. Mrs Boyes had been one of his patients and a good friend for thirteen years.




SHE SUFFERED FROM INTENSE ARTHRITIC PAIN. FIVE DAYS BEFORE SHE DIED, MRS. BOYES ASKED ME TO STOP HER SUFFERING BY ENDING HER LIFE.

Dr Cox tried to do this by giving her a large dose of heroin, but this seemed to make the pain she experienced worse. Finally he gave her an injection of potassium chloride which may well have finally killed her. Both her sons agreed with what Dr Cox had done, and believed he had "looked after our mother with care and compassion".


The Trial

Dr Cox was arrested and tried for murder. At the end of his trial, Mr Justice Ognall told him ...



WHAT YOU HAVE DONE IS NOT ONLY CRIMINAL, IT WAS A TOTAL BETRAYAL OF YOUR LINGUISTICAL DUTY AS A PHYSICIAN.

Dr Cox got a suspended sentence of twelve months. He was not, however, struck off the medical register by the General Medical Council, and continues to practise medicine. He still thinks he did the right thing for Mrs Boyes.

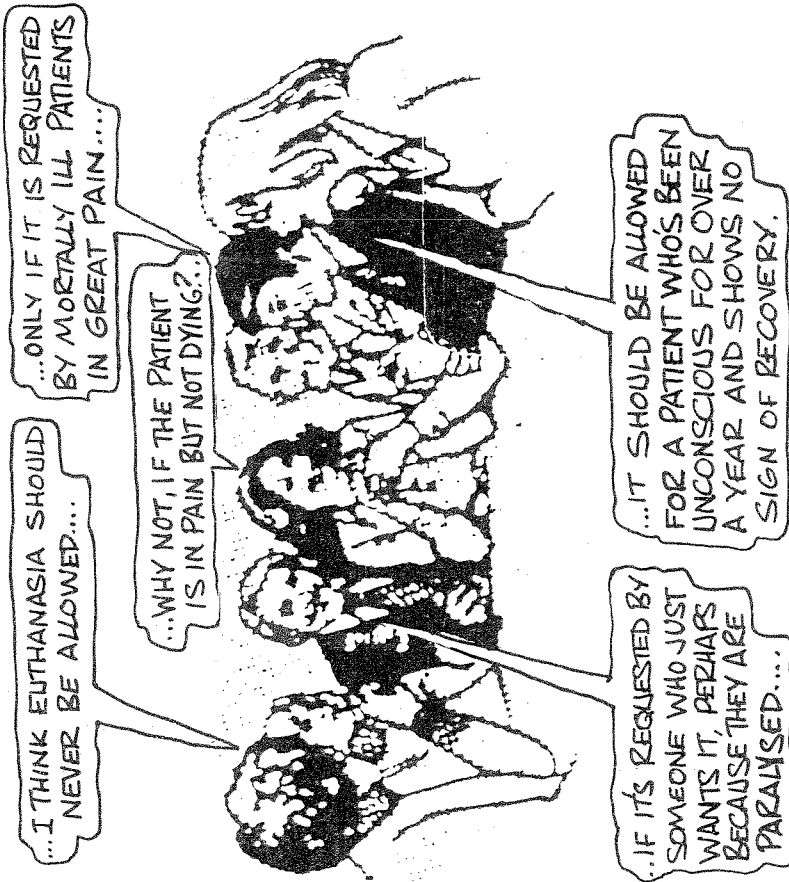


IT WAS A BONA FIDE ACT THAT WAS SOLELY IN THE INTERESTS OF MRS. BOYES. IT SEEMS SOMEWHAT HARSH TO CRIMINALIZE ME FOR DOING MY BEST IN WHAT WERE QUITE EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES.

Dr Cox clearly did something that was illegal, but was what he did morally wrong?

Is Euthanasia Acceptable?

This now famous legal case illustrates some of the main features of the ethical dilemma of euthanasia — "bringing about a gentle and easy death, especially in the case of an incurable and painful disease." Suicide is no longer illegal in Britain, but euthanasia is, primarily because it involves more than one person — usually close relatives and/or members of the medical profession. There is a wide range of opinion on the subject.




Most people respect life, yet at the same time want to help any human being who is in severe pain. There are no easy answers.

Euthanasia is a major moral dilemma for doctors, patients and many others involved. Few people seriously think that all permanent coma patients have to be kept alive on machinery for ever (although some do), and few people believe that a patient has to endure appalling untreatable pain for as long as possible (although some do). Some doctors and philosophers would say that their job is to save and preserve life and not to take it.



Arguments Against Euthanasia

The arguments against euthanasia are quite powerful. Most people believe that there is something intrinsically wicked about killing people. Some claim that life is "sacred" and only God or Nature has the right to take it away. The "slippery slope" argument reinforces this view.



SOME HUMAN BEINGS DON'T NEED MUCH OF AN EXCUSE IN ORDER TO KILL OTHERS AND EUTHANASIA CAN PROVIDE SUCH AN EXCUSE.


NAZI GERMANY IS AN EXAMPLE.

IF YOU ALLOW EUTHANASIA FOR COMATOSE TERMINAL PATIENTS, THEN YOU MIGHT EVENTUALLY SANCTION THE MURDER OF THE "RACIALLY IMPURE."

Once human life is regarded as disposable or cheap, then civilized moral values are in great danger.

Counter Arguments

Others argue that euthanasia is the "easy way out". It may discourage research into pain relief, cures for cancer and so on. Some argue that doctors and nurses may become brutalized or psychologically damaged if they are asked to kill, and that consequently other patients may fear them.



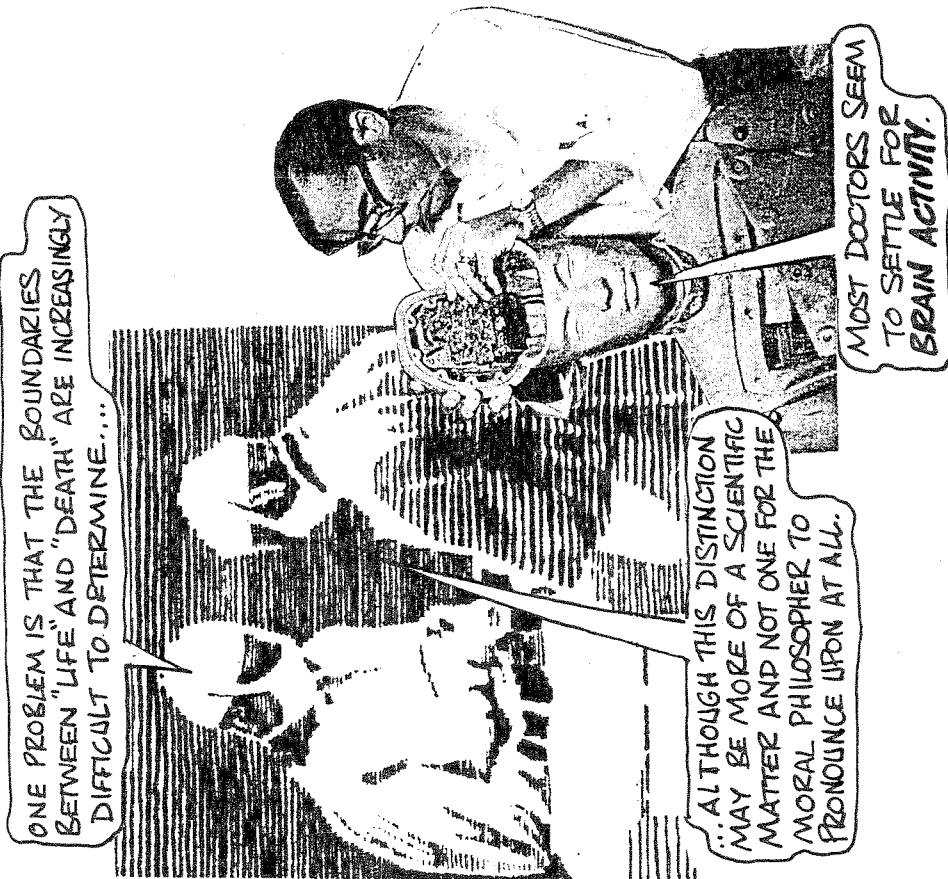
SUPPORTERS OF SOME FORMS OF EUTHANASIA ARGUE THAT IT WAS NAZI DOCTRINES OF RACIAL PURITY THAT LED TO THE DEATH CAMPS NOT LIBERAL EUTHANASIA LAWS.

IF THERE ARE CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD RULES, LIKE "ROTTERDAM RULES" THAT DUTCH DOCTORS NOW FOLLOW, THEN THERE NEED BE NO SLIPPERINESS NOR SLOPE.

IT ALSO SEEMS ODD TO SUGGEST THAT ALLOWING EUTHANASIA WOULD AUTOMATICALLY HINDER MEDICAL RESEARCH.

The Coma Patient

In cases of non-voluntary euthanasia, the onus is on doctors, relatives and others to decide on behalf of the unconscious, or the just born – all those who are unable to choose.



Philosophers in these instances will sometimes try to distinguish between someone "having a life" and "being alive" – the difference between biography and biology. Other philosophers like to talk about "persons".

You can try to decide what to do by employing Utilitarian pain and pleasure "sums". However, for coma patients who have little chance of recovery, the standard Utilitarian considerations of pain and pleasure seem irrelevant.



Let Nature Take Its Course

The Acts and Omissions doctrine often applies in these situations.



The Acts and Omissions guideline is a legal rather than moral distinction. It is hardly more moral to ignore a drowning man than actively to drown him. It may often be equally unclear whether the immoral act would be actively to kill someone in severe pain, rather than letting them die slowly by withdrawing treatment. Doing the latter would at least keep the doctor out of the courts.

Let The Patient Decide

Voluntary euthanasia is when the patient is fully conscious and able to request his or her own death.



What Do The Philosophers Say?

Kant

Kant and his followers offer conflicting advice here. A Kantian doctor who frowned on the moral laxity of someone who opted for suicide might find it hard to deny a patient's freely chosen right to decide his/her own fate: Kant places a high value on autonomy. He thought suicide was wrong, although his arguments against it aren't very convincing.

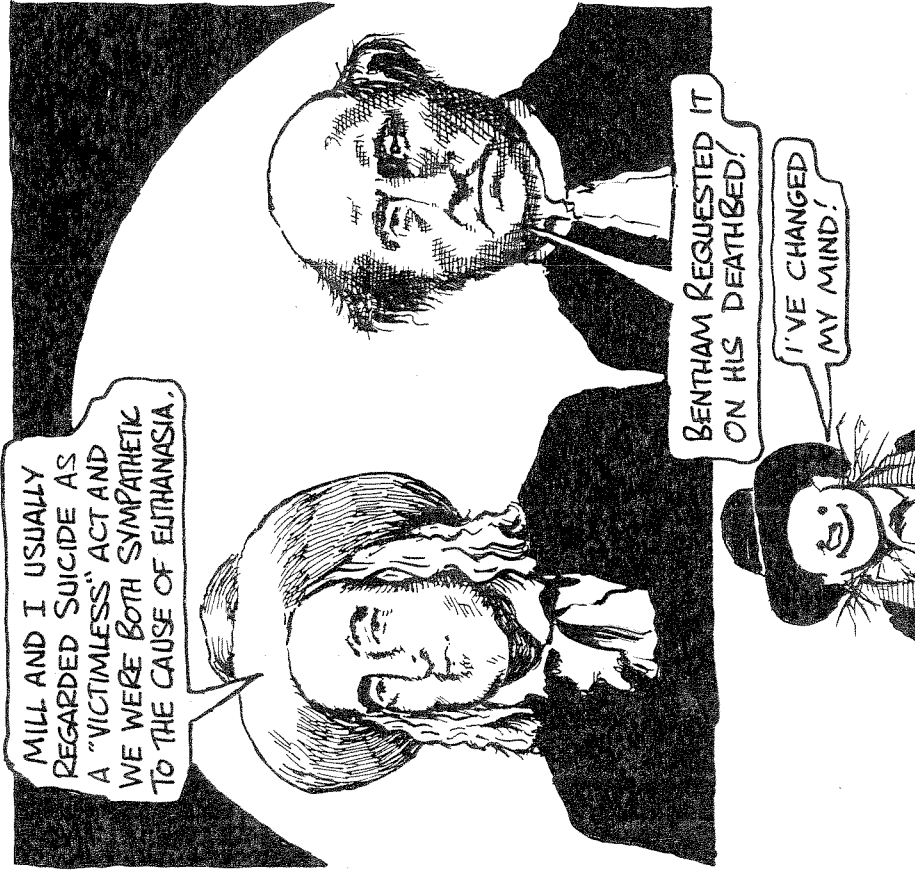


But several modern philosophers disagree: they argue that euthanasia could still be morally acceptable on Kantian grounds.



The Utilitarians

John Stuart Mill also stressed the importance of allowing individuals the freedom to choose what to do with their lives, provided no-one else suffered as a result. The "liberty argument" is a very strong one for Utilitarians.

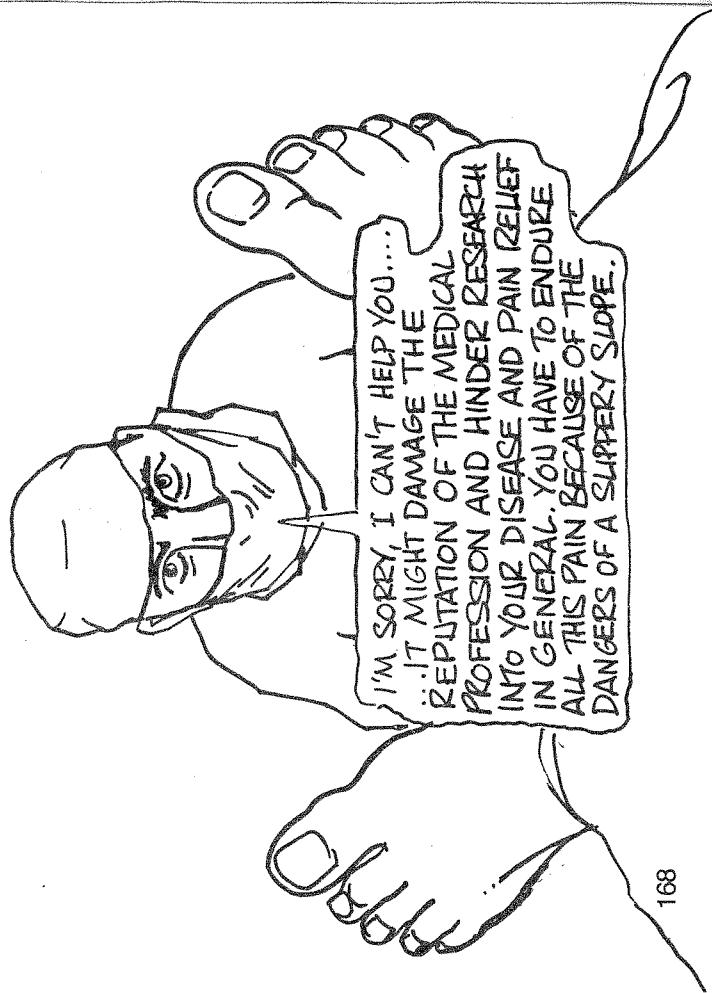


Utilitarians do seem to offer the most help in clarifying, if not solving, the problem of euthanasia. Utilitarians would think very carefully about the consequences of euthanasia for the patient, his relatives and friends, the medical profession and its reputation amongst the general public.

A Utilitarian doctor who decided whether or not to allow euthanasia would be entering dangerous territory.

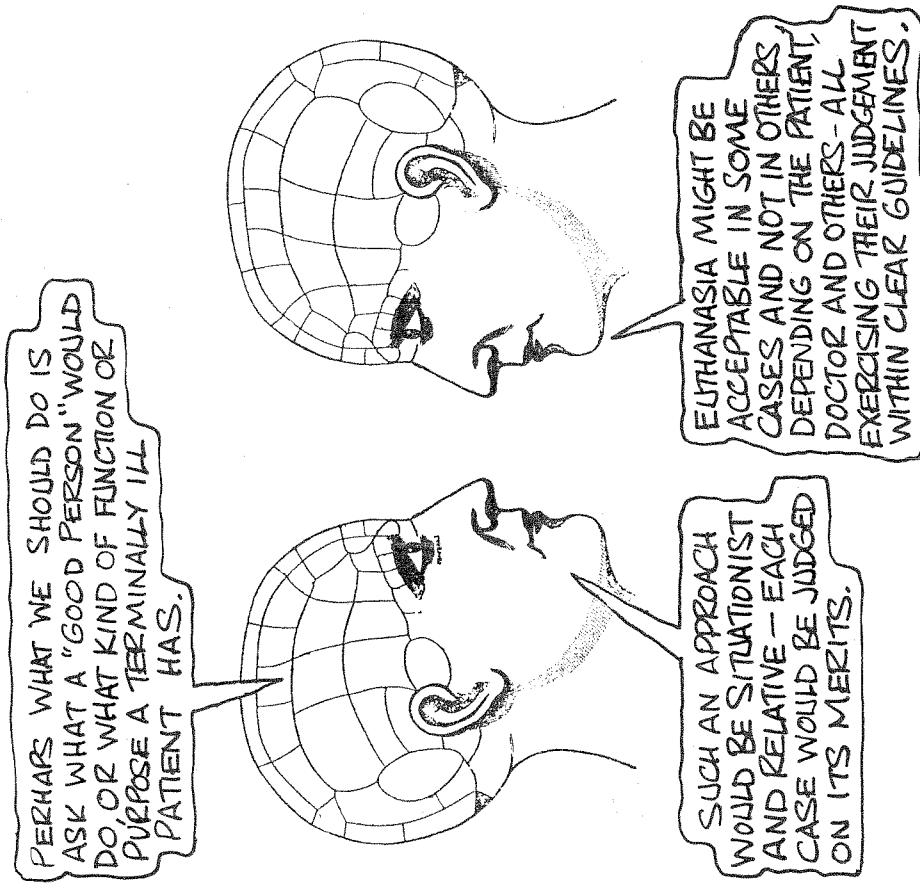


Imagine the difficulties faced by a Utilitarian doctor having to say to someone who is in great pain ...



Virtue Theory Again


Euthanasia is a good case for "virtue theory" and how it might help us to make moral decisions. It is because of the apparently conflicting advice offered to us by Utilitarians and Kantians in situations like these that some philosophers suggest that euthanasia just isn't "solvable" by appealing to ethical "systems".



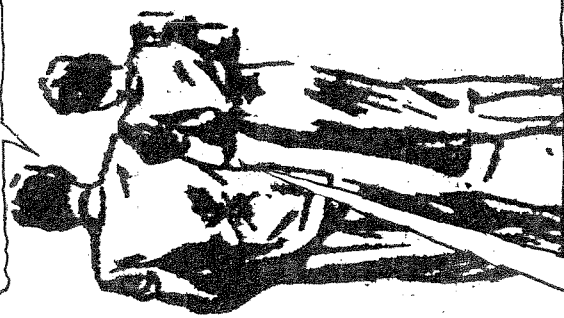
How the law could enter such arrangements, though, is hard to envisage, which makes some Aristotelians suggest that perhaps euthanasia is simply not something the law should get involved with at all. One wonders what Dr Cox might say.

What Do We Conclude?

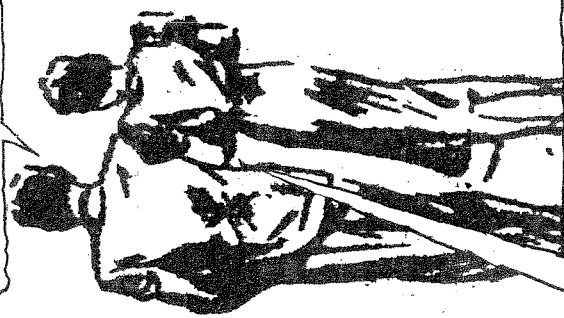
Ethics is difficult and probably always will be. It may derive partly from human nature – even if much of that is merely a useful fiction. Usually the attempt has been to make ethics objective and universal, when the evidence is clear that there is a huge range of different beliefs about how we should behave towards each other.



OLDER ETHICAL DOCTRINES ARE BY NO MEANS DEAD AND GONE.




SOME PHILOSOPHERS STILL BELIEVE THAT MORALITY IS ABOUT PRODUCING AND DISTRIBUTING HAPPINESS.



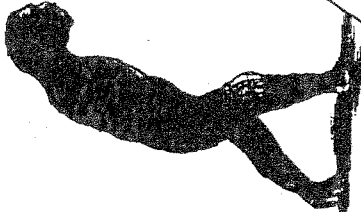
AND UTILITARIANISM STILL SEEMS A HELPFUL SYSTEM FOR ANALYZING AND EVALUATING (IF NOT SOLVING) COMPLEX PRACTICAL MORAL PROBLEMS.

Other moral philosophers believe, like Kant, that being moral means acting rationally and consistently. The return of "virtue ethics" may help to avoid some of the undesirable consequences of these other two doctrines but can itself be embarrassingly vague about how "situationally sensitive" individuals make moral decisions which are consistent and committed.

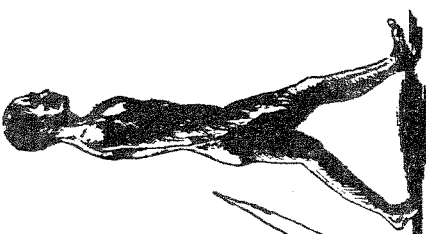
Postmodernism has accelerated our epistemological crisis. It is difficult now to be confident about the certainty of any human knowledge, especially knowledge about human beings themselves. It seems very unlikely that we shall ever discover universal and objective moral truths. The discovery of such truths looks even less likely than a discovery of what was around before the Big Bang.



THE BELIEF THAT HUMBLE PRIMATES COULD EVER DISCOVER SUCH METAPHYSICAL ENTITIES NOW LOOKS ARROGANT, DANGEROUS AND RATHER ODD.



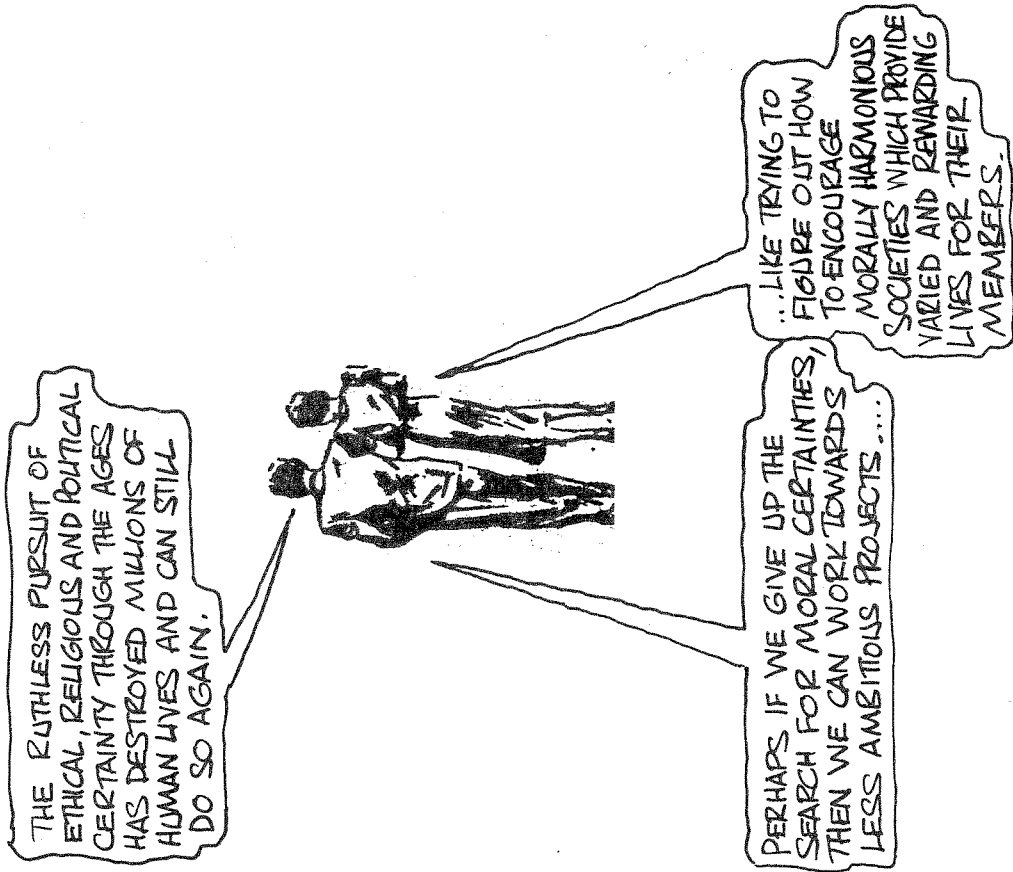
BUT THIS INFORMED SCEPTICISM CAN BE A POSITIVE THING.



IT SHOULD MAKE US SUSPICIOUS OF CHARISMATIC GURUS, INFLAMMATORY POLITICAL LEADERS AND ALL THOSE WHO CLAIM TO HAVE A HOTLINE TO THE MORAL TRUTH.

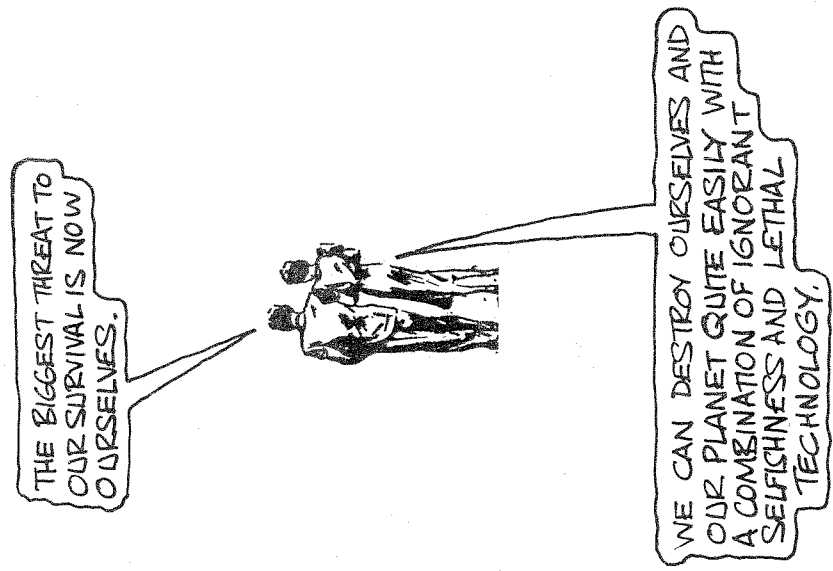
Because we can only make small tentative steps towards some form of limited and subjective human moral progress doesn't mean that such a thing is impossible.

As a species we have been, and still are, wonderfully inventive, creative and adventurous. But in spite of our microwave ovens and computers, we are still at a very primitive stage of moral development. Postmodernism may well have destroyed ethical certainty, but paradoxically it is this destruction that may help us to make moral progress.



This may mean that we end up living in smaller, ethically autonomous "tribes", or larger societies which are healthily pluralist and "open".

An idea known as the "Anthropic Principle" has been developed by recent cosmologists. This Principle looks at "possible" universes and proposes that our universe was specifically structured to allow human life to evolve successfully. If that's true, then we humans have been incredibly lucky to survive against almost impossible universal odds.



If we can face the fact that we are merely human beings with a limited grasp of a "knowledge", which we get via an unreliable set of human perceptual and conceptual equipment, then there may be hope for us. We can never achieve ethical certainty. But we can become more morally aware. If, as a species, we don't, then we just won't make it.

Ethics is still definitely something worth going in for.