Self-interest and morality

Why should we be moral? One answer is that, in some way, being moral is in our self-interest. This handout looks at three versions of this claim.

MORALITY AS A MEANS TO SELF-INTEREST

One version of the claim starts with an idea of self-interest. The assumption is that people can think about and pursue their self-interest without thinking about what is morally good or bad, right or wrong. They then realise that an agreement with other people about ways to behave will help them achieve what is in their self-interest. Their self-interest is independent of this agreement, and the agreement is just a means to the end of self-interest which they already had. This agreement is the basis of morality.

But is this assumption right? If we try to say what is in our self-interest, can we do so without either explicitly or implicitly drawing on ideas about what is morally good? Suppose we say, for example, that your self-interest is being happy. Then this is open to the objection that sometimes, getting what makes you happy is not actually good for you, that it is possible to be made happy by things which will harm you.

For example, someone might think that he is happy getting good marks without much work by copying essays off the internet. He feels happy, but later, he realises that he has not learned as much as he would have if he had worked out his own thoughts. So he starts doing this, and he feels a ‘truer’ happiness of real achievement.

We can argue that only ‘true’ happiness is in one’s self-interest. But how can we make a distinction between a superficial feeling of happiness and ‘true’ happiness? In the case above, we mentioned the value ‘achievement’. Perhaps you are only truly happy when there is something of real value in your life. Self-interest, then, is getting what is truly valuable.

If this is right, then we can’t talk about self-interest without talking about what is truly valuable. Some values will be moral values, e.g. the value of achievement involves the moral value of honesty – cheating doesn’t lead to achievement. So we cannot say what is in someone’s self-interest without knowing what is morally good.

In that case, morality can’t be an agreement we would make for the sake of self-interest, because self-interest is not something we can meaningfully specify independently of or prior to what is morally good.

RATIONALITY AND SELF-INTEREST

The defender of view that morality is a means to self-interest can reject these claims. Let us focus on ‘true’ happiness again. Yes, it is true that we cannot say that self-interest is getting whatever makes you happy. We must be able to evaluate our desires into ‘good’
(contributing to self-interest) and ‘bad’ (harmful to self-interest). But we can do this without using moral evaluation. Instead, we need to beef up our idea of rationality.

Rationality helps discover the means to our ends. But it can be more than this. Rather than talk about what is ‘truly valuable’, we should say this: what is in my self-interest is getting what I would want if I were completely rational. Being ‘completely rational’ means knowing all the relevant facts about my desires and their consequences in the real world, and selecting the best means to fulfil my desires. This definition doesn’t refer to any moral values, only to my desires. However, it provides a standard for evaluating my desires as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, viz. whether I would act on this desire if I were fully rational. So it is possible to articulate self-interest independently of any moral considerations.

Two responses
Is this a good definition of self-interest? Suppose someone feels very depressed. What they want, above all, is for the pain to stop. What would they want if they were completely rational? Would they continue to want to die or would they want to live? Can we answer this question without appealing to what is ‘good’, e.g. without saying that life is good, so it is more rational to want to live? Or again, suppose someone is obsessed with collecting every European stamp, and they sacrifice even friendships to pursue their hobby. Is this irrational? Is it in their self-interest? Or would it be better for them if they preferred friendship to stamps?

Second, is the account of self-interest complete? Scanlon argues that part of our self-interest lies in being treated morally. Having other people respect you, having the right to expect other people to be able to justify their behaviour to you – these are valuable. But we cannot explain their value in terms of some other benefit, such as getting what you want. It is in our nature as rational creatures to justify our behaviour to each other. It is in our self-interest, then, to have this capacity respected, for people to behave towards us in ways that we cannot reasonably reject.

PLATO’S ARGUMENT: THE MORAL SOUL
In the previous section, we saw the objection that when we start to reflect on what is really in our self-interest, it becomes difficult to describe what this is without referring to what is morally good. The most famous defence of the view that morality is constitutive of self-interest is given by Plato (Republic, Bk. 1, 2, 4). He is discussing justice, but his argument applies to being a morally good person generally. His argument is psychological: if you act immorally, your mind (or ‘soul’) will not be at peace, but at war with itself.

Plato wants to answer this challenge: Suppose that morality is an agreement between people each out to get the best for themselves. Then people who are in a better bargaining position will bias the agreement to favour themselves. If this is ‘unfair’ or ‘unjust’, so what? If they can get away with it, there is no reason for them not to. Acting ‘unjustly’, in the sense of disregarding the interests of other people while pursuing one’s own, will make one happy.

Of course, you have to get away with it. If you can force people to live according to rules that suit you, or if you can get away with breaking the rules of morality, great; if you can’t, if you break the rules and get caught and punished, then you won’t be happy. The point is, you have no reason to act morally, if you can get more for yourself by acting
immorally. No one who is rational and self-interested would act morally if they can get away with cheating.

**The virtuous soul**
Plato responds that this argument ignores the state of the soul of the person who would act in this way. Plato notes that we commonly experience internal, mental conflict, and we can think of this as different ‘parts’ of the soul pulling us in different directions. A common conflict is between what we instinctively want to do and what we think, on reflection, it would be best to do. So our souls have a ‘desiring’ part and a ‘rational’ part.

We are happier when there is no conflict between these two parts. This can only happen, Plato says, when reason is in charge. Our desires can get us into all sorts of trouble, they have no idea what is good for us. A happy soul is one in which desires are restrained, and happy to accept the rule of reason.

The desires of someone who is immoral are out of control. Each desire pushes for its own fulfilment, whether or not this is what the person needs. They aim for more and more or some desires, particularly forceful or ‘lawless’ ones, may outgrow others. The person may not recognise their situation. When ruled by desire, how we conceive of what is good is skewed – which is why we think that getting whatever we want will be better than acting morally. But this is simply a mistake.

By contrast, in a virtuous person, reason is in charge. This has three effects. First, they know what is morally right and good. (Plato believes that morality is objective, and known through reason.) Second, with reason in charge, they are motivated to act morally and not immorally. But third, and this is the crucial point for our argument, with reason in charge, they are happier, because a life without inner conflict is a happier life than one in which parts of the soul fight each other for supremacy. Rule by desires, therefore, cannot provide happiness as securely as rule by reason.

**Objections**
Plato's argument makes several assumptions that we can challenge.

First, he thinks that desires are unable to regulate themselves, that they are in some way ‘blind’ to what is good. Is this right? This description seems to fit bodily desires and obsessions (e.g. with money) better than others, e.g. those involved in friendship. Do desires necessarily get out of control? Plato can respond that desires, by their nature, do not involve consideration for the person as a whole. This kind of reflection is part of reason.

Second, we can object that the kind of reason needed is prudential, not moral. An immoral person needs to think about how to act in their self-interest, and this can involve reasoning. But why think this reasoning will lead them to act morally? Plato assumes that having reason in control automatically means acting morally. This is because he believes that if we reason well, we will realise that acting morally is truly good. But that still doesn’t mean it is in my self-interest. As the argument stands, a prudential immoral person could be happiest.

Third, Plato argues that only the rule of reason can secure the absence of inner conflict that is the mark of true happiness. We could reply that a little conflict could be worth it in order to satisfy certain desires.
Finally, the answer to why we should act morally is that we achieve a moral and happy soul. But does acting morally always produce a moral soul? Does acting immorally always produce an immoral soul? Suppose that acting morally does not make my soul better – I remain in conflict and I resent having to act morally. Since I am not being made happy, then perhaps I would be better off not conforming to the expectations of morality. I may not be as happy as someone with a moral soul, but I will be as happy as I can be. In this case, it is still an open question why I should behave morally, rather than get away with immoral acts which promote my self-interest if I can.

ARISTOTLE ON LIVING IN ACCORDANCE WITH REASON

Aristotle agreed with Plato that being a morally good person is the best way (for oneself) to be. He argued that it is the fullest realization of what it is to be a human being. But in making this argument, Aristotle appealed to the social nature of human beings much more than Plato did. On this view, what is good for me is defined, in part, by how I relate to other people, and a good relationship is good for both me and others. And so I can only achieve what is good for me by acting in ways that are necessarily beneficial to other people as well.

We are all aiming, says Aristotle, to lead the best life we can (Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. 1). But in order to understand what the best life for us is, we need to understand more about our nature. Think of a tiger and a sheep. The best life for a sheep is quite different from the best life for a tiger. Sheep live together, tigers – mostly – live alone. A sheep on its own will be less happy, and tigers together will fight.

Aristotle argues that what is distinctive about us is our capacity to reason. So the best life for a human being will be one lived ‘in accordance with reason’. As Plato argued, our state of mind is very important. In particular, a life in accordance with reason will be one in which our desires, emotions, and choices are reasonable.

Anyone who doesn’t want or need other people is either a beast or a god, says Aristotle. So we need to consider carefully how our desires and emotions fit in with living with other people.

There is no quick answer, he says, and he goes on to consider a wide range of desires and emotions, arguing that there is a reasonable and an unreasonable form of each. Take, for example, anger. First, this is natural and necessary – anger is a legitimate response to being put down or badly treated, and it can help us stand up for ourselves. But to feel anger ‘well’ or ‘reasonably’, we should only get angry when we really have been treated badly, so we need to know when this is. Then again, we need to direct our anger at people who deserve it, not sound off at people who don’t. And so on. So, Aristotle says, we need to feel anger

at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way’. (Nicomachean Ethics, Book II, Ch. 6)

If we can do this with each desire and emotion we have, then we will be a morally good person, and our relations with other people will be as good as they can be. We will also be living in accordance with reason. And so we will be living the best life for ourselves.
Are we all social?
Friedrich Nietzsche would object to the idea that there is one account of human nature, applicable to everyone, and morality is defined relative to this. People are unequal. Only the ‘highest’ or ‘most noble’ can hope to achieve the best human life possible. The need they have for relations with other people is limited to their equals. But most people are ‘common’ and the ‘higher’ types are very rare indeed, and will in any case seek solitude. How they treat people ‘below’ them is irrelevant. They will view most people with contempt and are willing to use them in whatever way is necessary for their own self-interest.

Second, this is not simply a matter of fact, it is entirely right, Nietzsche argues, an expression of the noble person’s love of life and power. Life necessarily involves predation (Beyond Good and Evil, § 259), while the desire to be pleasing to others, to be part of a community, is a ‘herd instinct’. Morality, as it has developed in Europe over the last 2,000 years, is an expression of this herd instinct. The best individuals break away from it. Of course, if someone is not ‘exceptional’ – and by definition, very few of us are – then the best life we can achieve is through the community. But this is not the best life for everyone.

It is as though, for Nietzsche, there are human beings that are sheep, so need a sheep’s life; and there are human beings that are tigers, and so need quite a different life, one that he describes as ‘beyond good and evil’. It is a life in which we sheep will be treated in ways which we would call ‘immoral’. But there is no reason why such people shouldn’t be immoral.