

## u3a Philosophy Group. Report from the April Meeting

### How Can That Be Right?

The group looked further at “*Right and Wrong*”, the fundamental philosophical topic of **Ethics**. If some human actions or omissions are **good**, and some **evil**, then Ethics looks at how one “**ought**” to behave. Previously we had considered the *Virtue Theory* and the *Consequentialist Theory*. This time we looked at the *Duty Theory*, or **Deontology**.

Philosophers with views on morality over the centuries, include *Aristotle*, *Machiavelli*, *Hobbes*, *Berkeley*, *Voltaire* and *Naess*. We looked at various religion-based views, and then we considered scientific and reason-based views, like those of *Immanuel Kant*.

*Kant*, an eminent 18<sup>th</sup> century scientist, turned to philosophy late in life, during the European intellectual period known as *The Enlightenment Age*; a period noted for its reliance on reason and logic, rather than on tradition, or faith. Much of the thinking came from Scottish philosopher *David Hume*, who analysed *cause-and-effect relationships*.

“**Causation**” is a concept used to discover why certain events follow, or appear caused by, other events.

Kant felt “**duty**” was the only acceptable motive for good behaviour, decriing wrong reasons like self-interest. Consequences were irrelevant: an action was either moral or not, and the intention behind the act, the “**maxim**”, was crucial. This applied in all circumstances, and he called it his “**Categorical Imperative**”.

We then looked at “**free will**”: for an action or omission to be moral, 1. the actor has *decided* to act or omit, 2. the decision was taken with the pure motive of acting morally, and 3. one would genuinely wish that action, in that circumstance, to be an “**universal law**”.

There are problems with this theory; it is vague and very difficult to apply to day-to-day decisions. It may lead to some absurd decisions, and it completely ignores emotions like compassion.

We discussed several general moral topics: including whether variations might apply to collective actions, or to actions taken by groups like generals or MPs. We also visited **Meta Ethics**, or *Applied Ethics*, which considers how theorists apply their moral theories to specific problems, e.g. when looking at the morality of Euthanasia. A meta-ethicist might seek to define and measure terms like justice or forgiveness, whereas Kant believed that duties follow from *logical considerations*, not from emotional ones.

*G E Moore* developed *Hume's* views, stating that one cannot work out what "ought to be done" merely by observation of the situation. *Jean Paul Sartre* claimed that the route for deciding correct action was personal judgement and not a "calculation". *A J Ayers* felt that all ethical statements were meaningless, based not on fact but purely a reflection of their opinion.

We concluded that moral philosophy is a complex and broad subject, of which we had only scraped the surface, then I went off for a double shot of caffeine. On May 24<sup>th</sup> we look at **Animals**, touching on subjects like vegetarianism, animal suffering, animal welfare and animal rights. On 28<sup>th</sup> June we will be looking at Politics.

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