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## Moral theories

# Berkeley's moral philosophy

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### Author's abstract

*Berkeley held that the moral duty of mankind was to obey God's laws; that – since God was a benevolent Creator – the object of His laws must be to promote the welfare and flourishing of mankind; and that, accordingly, humans could identify their moral duties by asking what system of laws for conduct would in fact tend to promote that object. This position – which is akin to that of 'rule' Utilitarianism – is neither unfamiliar nor manifestly untenable. He was surely mistaken, however, in his further supposition that, if this theory were accepted, the resolution of all (or most) particular moral dilemmas would be simple and straightforward.*

Berkeley wrote comparatively little about moral philosophy, and at first sight that may seem a surprising fact. For he insisted that his principal concern as a philosopher was practical rather than theoretical; his hope was to promote by his writings the virtue and welfare and happiness of mankind, and one might think that such an aspiration would naturally have led him to deal at large with questions of ethics. The explanation is, I think, that he felt virtue to be threatened in his time not by errors in ethics, but by less direct and more insidious enemies. He was sure that virtue needed the support of sound religious belief; and, living as he did – he was born in 1685 – in what might be called the early heroic age of the natural sciences, he believed that encroaching confusion and error in *that* field were the fundamental perils. Propagandists and practitioners of the natural sciences, even if well-intentioned (and not all of them were), seemed to give countenance to 'scepticism' and 'materialism', to determinism, even openly to atheism; the defence of virtue needed first and fundamentally a defence of sound religion, and that, he believed, was a matter of extirpating error in metaphysics, the theory of knowledge, and the philosophy of science. Ethics itself, he over-confidently believed, to any mind not corrupted or confused by the science-dominated spirit of the age, was comparatively plain sailing. It is surely

for that reason that his major works, most notably *The Principles of Human Knowledge* of 1710, deal with issues of metaphysics and epistemology and, crucially, of the philosophy of science, and that it was only on a much smaller scale, particularly in his curious little pamphlet called *Passive Obedience* (1712), that he dealt directly with moral philosophy itself.

The corner-stone of morality, in Berkeley's view, is the recognition that we, as well as the world in which we live, are the creation of God. God's will regulates the inanimate (what some wrongly call the 'material') world in accordance with laws that are the proper subject-matter of science; for his human creatures there are also laws prescribed which, however, <sup>copyright</sup> possessing free-will, they are *required* but not *compelled* to obey. The moral duty of mankind is to obey God's laws. Berkeley thought it self-evident, apparently, that a created being possessed of a will has a duty to obey such precepts as its creator may issue; the point is perhaps not so obvious as all that, but in any case Berkeley feels no need to raise a question there. His question is: What *are* God's precepts? How are we to determine what God's laws demand of us?

We need not at this point, Berkeley believed, simply refer to theological authority. No doubt – as a clergyman and, after 1734, a Bishop – he believed that due attention to scripture and the teaching of the Church would indeed apprise us of our moral duties; but we can in fact come to know them, he contends, by argument alone. God is a benevolent creator; as such he desires the welfare and flourishing of his human creatures; they are called upon, therefore, so to conduct their lives as to promote so far as possible such welfare and flourishing.

There cannot, however, Berkeley holds, be just one, single precept of morality: 'Always act so as to promote, so far as possible, human welfare and flourishing'. It would be much too difficult, and besides would take far too long, for every agent on every occasion to try to calculate, for every alternative course open to him, which would most effectually promote the general good of humanity; and would there not also, inevitably, be frequent and damaging disagreement as to whether such calculation had been correctly done? There must therefore be, Berkeley submits, a set or system of subsidiary *general principles*,

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### Key words

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such that the general practice of compliance with those principles would most effectually promote the welfare and flourishing of mankind; and the question for the individual agent is simply whether his envisaged act would accord with, or would violate, any principle that is a member of that set or system.

This position, clearly, makes Berkeley as a moral philosopher look very like a certain kind of Utilitarian. He would have rejected, one supposes, that species of very hard-nosed Utilitarianism which insists that human good is to be identified always and only with 'quantity of pleasure' – at the very least, he would have held that some pleasures are better, or 'higher', than others, and that it is the 'higher' pleasures which make up the true happiness of men; and he would certainly reject 'act' – Utilitarianism – the theory that right and wrong acts are always to be identified, individually, by direct and immediate reference to their tendency to promote (or detract from) utility, 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. But in the substance of his theory he is certainly close to 'rule' – Utilitarianism – the theory, roughly, that right conduct complies with some rule, such rule being a member of a set whose general adoption would most effectually tend to promote the 'utility' of mankind. He cannot, however, accurately be said to be a Utilitarian: for two reasons. Principally, a Utilitarian holds that action is morally right or wrong just *because of* its tendency to promote (or otherwise) the general end of utility; Berkeley holds that action is morally right or wrong *because* it complies with (or breaches) one of God's laws, and 'utility', for him, comes in only incidentally to determination of the question what *are* the laws of a benevolent deity. But there is also, I think, an issue of motivation. A Utilitarian such as John Stuart Mill would hold that it is at least possible for a person to be actually motivated towards moral conduct by concern for the general well-being of mankind. Berkeley, I believe – though his position is not made absolutely clear – did not accept that. If we see a given principle of conduct as a law of God, then indeed we have a powerful motive for attempting to comply with it – not only proper reverence for the Creator's will, but also a highly rational, self-interested apprehension of the penalties he will in due course inflict upon the disobedient. Berkeley's belief that 'scepticism' and atheism must lead to a general collapse of sound morality seems to imply the belief that, *unless* we see principles of conduct as laws of God, we shall be unmoved, or at least inadequately moved, towards compliance with them – that self-interested humans will probably not be effectively motivated by the mere realisation that some act or course of conduct would be welcome or advantageous to other people; even if they realise that quite clearly, it may leave them unmoved. He writes, in *Passive Obedience*, that self-interest is 'a principle of all others the most universal, and the most deeply engraven in our hearts'; it appears that religion is required, if that principle is reliably to be engaged in the service of moral conduct.

There is, of course, in general, nothing merely absurd in Berkeley's position. The idea that 'morality' should be seen as a 'system' of principles of conduct, the point, object, or *rationale* of which is that the general practice of compliance with those principles would tend to promote human welfare and flourishing, is an idea that has never lacked persuasive advocacy. (Some, particularly in our own day, would deplore the seemingly exclusive concern with *human* welfare – what about non-human animals? – but the view can surely be so modified as to accommodate the force of that objection.) The idea that such a system of principles must, if it is to stand as true and efficacious *morality*, be seen as the content of God's law for his human creatures, is of course far more contentious, but again is far from lacking formidable defenders in our own day. And certainly one is familiar enough with the suggestion that alleged deterioration in moral behaviour is directly attributable to the weakening of religious belief, and could be arrested only by a revival of religious faith and observance. There is, however, one general respect, and one particular respect, in which it seems to me that Berkeley clearly goes wrong, and I shall end by commenting briefly on those.

First, in general, Berkeley makes the surely ill-considered claim that, if we see morality in the light that he proposes, then the particular requirements of morality – or at least 'the principal of them' – 'may without much difficulty be deduced'. This is surely, perhaps sadly, very far from the truth. It is perhaps obvious enough that any system of precepts, if its general adoption were to be advantageous to mankind, must include injunctions against wanton violence and killing, casual (or deliberate) cruelty and destruction, uninhibited lying and treachery, and the like. But what about chastity? Or homosexuality? Or abortion? Or the use, or threatened use, of nuclear weapons? What about the experimental use of animals in medical research – or of, to come right up to date, 'spare' human embryos? The question – to take the last example – which Berkeley invites us to consider is this: would a system of principles which contains a principle permitting (no doubt subject to some restrictions) the use of human embryonic material for purposes of research be, overall and in the long run and in the broadest perspective, *more* contributory to the welfare of mankind in general, or *less*, than a system containing a prohibition against such use? I do not suggest that that is not a perfectly proper question to raise; my suggestion is only that Berkeley was surely mistaken in supposing that, once properly posed, it can be answered 'without much difficulty'; and it would be easy enough to multiply examples. As a matter of fact Berkeley makes things even more difficult for himself by his unargued insistence that at any rate the negative precepts of morality – those of the form 'Thou shalt *not* ...' – must always be peremptory, absolute, and exceptionless; for if that is right, the moral status even of, for example, lying must, on his own view, look desperately debatable. Is a system which holds that one

must *never*, in *any* circumstances or for *any* reason, lie, more conducive, or less, to the welfare of mankind in general than a system which admits at least some lies in some circumstances to be at least permissible? Berkeley holds, by implication, that 'Thou shalt not lie, *ever*' is *obviously* the only admissible principle. He is not obviously right. Of course Berkeley is not alone in this respect; his near kinsmen, the Utilitarians, were also inclined to suggest that, once their theory were accepted, then solution of 'the particulars' would be simple, or at any rate much simplified; even Kant fell victim to the corresponding illusion. Moral philosophers, it seems, are strangely reluctant to recognise that even a quite clear and simple-looking ethical *theory* will not magically simplify the sometimes insolubly complicated, convoluted dilemmas of moral practice.

Finally, Berkeley was surely wrong in the particular instance, in relation to which he deploys his general theory. His particular object in *Passive Obedience* is to argue that established political authority must not be resisted – that that is a precept of morality, and that it

means, accordingly, that *no* political authority may *ever* permissibly be resisted, in *any* circumstances. On his own view, he should have been able to make this clear 'without much difficulty', and indeed he claims that he has actually done so. But if we set the case out clearly – if we see him to be committed to maintaining that a system of principles, which includes an absolute prohibition against offering resistance, ever, to any political authority however wicked or sanguinary or oppressive, is more conducive to the welfare of mankind than would be a system which allowed such resistance to be sometimes at least permissible – then the merit of his argument looks rather more than doubtful. Perhaps, even here, it is not simply and completely obvious that his contention is wrong. But at any rate it is not, as on his own view it ought to be, just obviously right.

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