

*"On the whole human beings want to be good, but not too good, and not quite all the time."*  
[George Orwell, 1903-50]

## Workshop Description

One of the ways in which dogs have an easier time of it than we do is that they never have to worry about ethics. We, by contrast, have to think about what is right and wrong and good and bad. This is because, unlike dogs, we are capable of asking the question "What should I do?" The aim of this workshop is to consider how, if at all, we can justify our moral beliefs. After setting up a simple model of moral reasoning, we consider two key threats to ethics and then go on to look at the nature of happiness and how different theories of ethics cast light on various moral dilemmas.

## Topics Covered

- 1. Moral Relativism** According to moral relativism, our values are determined by the society we grow up in and there are no universal values. Although such relativism might seem to encourage a tolerant "live and let live" attitude to other cultures, a major drawback is that it robs us of the ability to pass moral judgements about things we find abhorrent. For this reason it is in practice difficult to be a consistent relativist.
- 2. Egoism & Altruism** Some people claim that human beings are always and everywhere selfish. Since selfish behaviour is usually seen as the opposite of moral behaviour, this theory suggests that even if there are objective moral values we are incapable of living up to them. We look at four arguments in support of "psychological egoism" and then consider how we might respond to them. Perhaps to describe everyone as selfish is in the end to empty the word "selfish" of its meaning.
- 3. The Nature of Happiness** Happiness plays an important role in many theories of ethics. The strange thing is that although we all want to be happy, we do not seem to have a very clear idea of what it is or how to achieve it. We look at the role played by such things as sensory pleasures, money and meaning in a happy life, and raise the question of whether there are other things, in addition to happiness that have intrinsic value.
- 4. Theories of Ethics** In the final session, we compare and contrast two different theories of ethics: (a) duty ethics in which the golden rule "Do as you would be done by" plays a central role; and (b) utilitarianism which is based on the principle that we should seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number." We then try to apply these theories to various moral problems. While they may illuminate such problems, it seems that in the end we cannot pass the moral buck and must make our own decisions about what to do.

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