

competitive struggle, with little room for virtues such as altruism and justice. It is very hard to recapture any robust sense of what nature intends for us, given the plasticities of environment and culture that we have already touched upon. Furthermore, we are used to the idea that a lot of modern living is 'unnatural' - but for that very reason better than anything nearer to nature. Few of us want to return to being hunter-gatherers. Books, concerts, and bicycles are unnatural, but components of many a good life. Conversely, there is nothing particularly virtuous about confining ourselves to 'natural' diets or 'natural' ways of locomotion, or shelter, or sexual behaviour.

We could expand our concept of the natural, arguing, for instance, that since nature has equipped us with a huge general-purpose intelligence, anything produced using that intelligence should count as natural and therefore healthy. Just as all languages are equally natural, so all expressions of the general-purpose

intelligence are. But this is not going to select out just some pleasures or some ways of living as especially healthy for human beings. Our intelligences can lead us to the destruction of ourselves and others just as quickly as they lead to health and flourishing. The gardens of the human condition contain some pretty depressing areas (as Leunig shows us, opposite). We will need to remember these cautions when we return to Aristotle as someone who potentially provides 'foundations' for ethics in section 17.

12. The greatest happiness of the greatest number

We met in the previous section the formula of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Utilitarianism is the moral philosophy putting that at the centre of things. It concentrates upon general well-wishing or benevolence, or *solidarity* or identification with the pleasures and pains or welfare of people as a whole. This is the impartial measure of how well things are going in general. The good is identified with the greatest happiness of the greatest number, and the aim of action is to advance the good (this is known as the principle of utility). Utilitarianism is *consequentialist*, or in other words, forward-looking. It looks to the effects or consequences of actions in order to assess them. In this it contrasts with deontological ethics. For consequentialism, an action that might be thought wrong, or undutiful, or unjust, or a trespass against someone's rights, might apparently be whitewashed or justified by its consequences, if it can be shown to be conducive to the general good. Utilitarianism fits better with the 'gradualist' approach to ethical issues, illustrated above in the case of abortion. It deals with value - with things being good or bad, or better or worse - as the greatest happiness of the greatest number increases or diminishes.

Deontological notions of justice, rights, duties, fit into a moralistic climate, where things just *are* right and wrong, permissible or punishable. These are the words of law, as much as words of ethics. Utilitarianism by contrast gives us the language of social goods. A



9. Leunig, 'Gardens of the Human Condition'.