



# PROMISES PROMISES

By Oliver Leech

## THE PHILOSOPHY

This session introduces an old chestnut from the repertoire of ethical problems. Traditionally, the story draws attention to the distinction between a deontological response (there is a duty to keep promises no matter what the consequences) and a utilitarian approach (the right course of action is that which maximises happiness) but the discussion might go in completely different and equally rewarding philosophical directions.

## STARTING STIMULI

Write two sentences on a board:

- a. 'I will pay back to you on Monday next week the money I am asking you to lend me today, Friday.'
- b. 'I promise to pay back to you on Monday next week the money I am asking you to lend to me today, Friday.'

### Task Question 1

- ✓ Are there any differences between these two sentences?

When I introduced this topic, some pupils said that in b) but not in a) a commitment was being made or that in b) in some way in the words I promise 'you put yourself in'. I was intrigued to be told by several pupils that b) was more suspect than a) on the grounds that the addition of 'I promise' looked as though it had been added just for persuasive effect by an untrustworthy person.

Nested Questions:

- ✓ Does it make any difference whether the person asking for a loan is a stranger, someone known to you, a friend?
- ✓ Is the character of the person more or less important than the form of words?
- ✓ Does a signature in addition to the words make a difference? If so, why? What does a signature add?
- ✓ Suppose on Monday the money is not paid back. Does it make any difference now whether the words 'I promise' were said or not?
- ✓ Is it important to keep promises? If so, for what reason(s)?
- ✓ Is it possible to keep half a promise? Or is a promise something you either keep or do not keep with no position in between. (You might bring in promising to keep a secret, a request most pupils will have received. If you were to hint at the secret without actually uttering it, does that amount to half keeping the promise?)

## STIMULUS 2

Story: *The Old Lady and the Cats' Home:*

Suppose that your house is next door to that of an elderly lady who lives on her own except for the cats she looks after. You know that she has no relations at all, no husband, children, not even any cousins. You have always got on well with her and because she is on her own and cannot get to town very easily you do errands for her from time to time, shopping and posting letters and so on.

One day when you are chatting to her in the garden, she starts to talk very seriously and quietly so that none of the neighbours can hear. She says that she does not like banks and does not trust them to look after her money. But she does trust you. She tells you that she keeps a lot of money under a floorboard in her bedroom. She asks you to do something for her in the future. When she dies, she wants you to take the money and give it to a charity. What sort of charity, you ask. She has always loved cats. She wants you to give the money to a cats' home—she will tell you which one when you need to know. She begs you to promise to do this for her. She has told no one else what she has planned. You and she will be the only people to know. You agree. You make the promise. She gives you two keys, one to her house and one that will open the box containing the money.

You move away from the area and forget all about this conversation for several years. Then you hear the news that the old lady has died and it all comes back to you. You go to her house and open the door with the key. You lift the loose floorboard in the bedroom and find a box. You get out the other key and turn it in the lock. You lift the lid. Inside the box is a pile of £50 notes and a piece of paper. Quite a large wad of notes! Even though you are on your own you say, 'Wow!'. You count the

notes. There is £100,000 in there.

*You take the box home with you and think about your responsibility. You unfold the piece of paper. All it has on it in the old lady's handwriting is the address of a cats' home. Now you remember that it has been a very difficult time in the area where you live. Factories have closed and there are many people who have no jobs. You know several people who cannot afford to have operations which will make them much healthier and relieve them of much pain. There are people with nowhere to live.*

## Task Question 2:

- ✔ What is the right thing to do with that money? Give it as you promised to the cats' home? Give the money to people in need?

At this point invite discussion about the right course of action.

Now amend the story in the following ways.

Ask those who want to keep the promise and give the money to cats' home to hear the next part of the story.

## STORY CONTINUED:

*You visit the cats' home. You say you are interested in making a donation (but you say nothing about the old lady and the promise). The cats are very well looked after: they have soft blankets to lie on, several play areas, a chef who specialises in making food that cats love and a choice of food; they are groomed every day by specially trained attendants; they have their own vets on call around the clock. In fact they live a life of luxury. The officials at the cats' home say that they would use any donation to build another area for cats to play in. Another one, you ask. How many do they already have? Four. You realise that these are the most pampered cats you have ever heard of.*

## Task Question 3:

- ✔ Now you have been told this, does it make any difference to what is the right course of action as regards the money?

You could go further and ratchet up the utilitarian case even more:

Further Thought Experiments

- ✔ You open the paper and read that there is an appeal to help people who are victims of a drought. There are charities with advertisements that say that a gift of just a few pounds you can give village fresh water for their babies or blind people can have operations that will give them back their sight.
- ✔ It is not just the bad times listed above. Now it is about you own family. Your brother is about to lose his business and his house because he cannot pay his debts. He has five children and they will have nowhere to live. Does this make any difference to your choice of what to do with the money?
- ✔ It is members of your own family who desperately need money for food or an operation.

Additional Point:

Suppose it is suggested that the motive for keeping the promise is to avoid 'feeling bad about yourself' or, as one pupil added, to avoid being haunted by the ghost of the old lady. This motive raises the issue of the place of self-interest in morally good behaviour.