From morality to the small screen

Television creates what I will call a ‘moral imaginary’; the various aspects of other peoples’ lives seen through the small screen swirl in an imaginary realm that is shared among people in a variety of ways. I will develop this idea of a moral imaginary later, especially in Chapter 8, but here I want to show simply that television programmes can have moral content that fits with the traditional themes of morality addressed by philosophers. The philosophic tradition has tended to discuss morality in terms of the intrinsic qualities of individuals (virtue), the principles by which their conduct is guided (duty) or the consequences of individuals’ actions (seeking greatest good for the greatest number), and the content of television programmes can be seen as fitting with these approaches. This approach has been used as a way to make sense of literature (see, for example, the pieces collected in Pojman, 2000) and, more recently, computer games (see Schulzke, 2010) but not, surprisingly, television. The three themes I want to discuss – the good, the dutiful and the fair – would be, in principle, discoverable in any programme, but some are more relevant than others. What follows is not intended to be sophisticated philosophical debate but simply to draw out the connections between the narrative logic of television programmes and some well-established philosophical ideas about morality – virtue, duty and liberal utilitarianism. However, before I show how these themes are the stuff of television programmes, it is important to recognise that the issue of moral impact of television has been a contentious issue since if first began.
The immoral effects of television?

The theme of this book – television and morality – is not as original as I first thought. From its beginning, there has been concern about the immorality of the content of television, but the moral effect of the medium of television has also been discussed a number of times in the last thirty years. Social psychologists, especially those interested in developmental psychology, recognised that children would respond to the morality of television programmes. Bandura’s famous ‘Bobo’ doll laboratory experiments are still cited as evidence of the moral effects of audiovisual moving images (Bandura, 1968, 1978 – for an overview see Gunter, 1994, p. 170) even though all they show is that children can learn new ways to play with dolls from watching films. The personal and psychological effects of television, especially the showing of sex and violence, have been thoroughly researched through field experiments, correlational surveys, longitudinal panel studies, experiments and intervention studies, but no consistent or persuasive demonstration of moral effects has emerged (see reviews of the literature in Cumberbatch et al., 1987; Felson, 1994; Gunter, 1994; Gauntlett, 2004). Despite the limitations of laboratory experiments for understanding what are increasingly recognised, even by psychologists, as sociocultural processes, social cognition theorists have continued to try to isolate the ‘effects’ of television (Berkowitz, 1964; Bandura, 1994; Krahé et al., 2001; Ferguson, 2011). However, social psychology has shown that viewers, including children, bring their own moral values to making sense of narratives (Zillman and Bryant, 1975) and that a sense of what is just and right affects their enjoyment of television (Raney and Bryant, 2002).

Within communication studies, George Gerbner and his colleagues (Gerbner, 1970; Gerbner and Gross, 1976) have argued that television has an impact on public attitudes and the value system of a common culture, not through a simple cause-and-effect model but by what they call ‘cultivation’. How violence appears on television, they say, is inflected – or stereotyped – for the class, ethnicity, sex and age of both perpetrators and victims. What is shown does not necessarily tell us much about what people think or do but through analysing the key indicators in mass media messages, research ‘will tell us much about the shared representations of life, the issues, the prevailing points of view that capture the public attention, occupy people’s time, and animate their imagination’ (Gerbner, 1970, p. 81). The cultivation theorists argue that television viewers develop a sense of heightened risk and