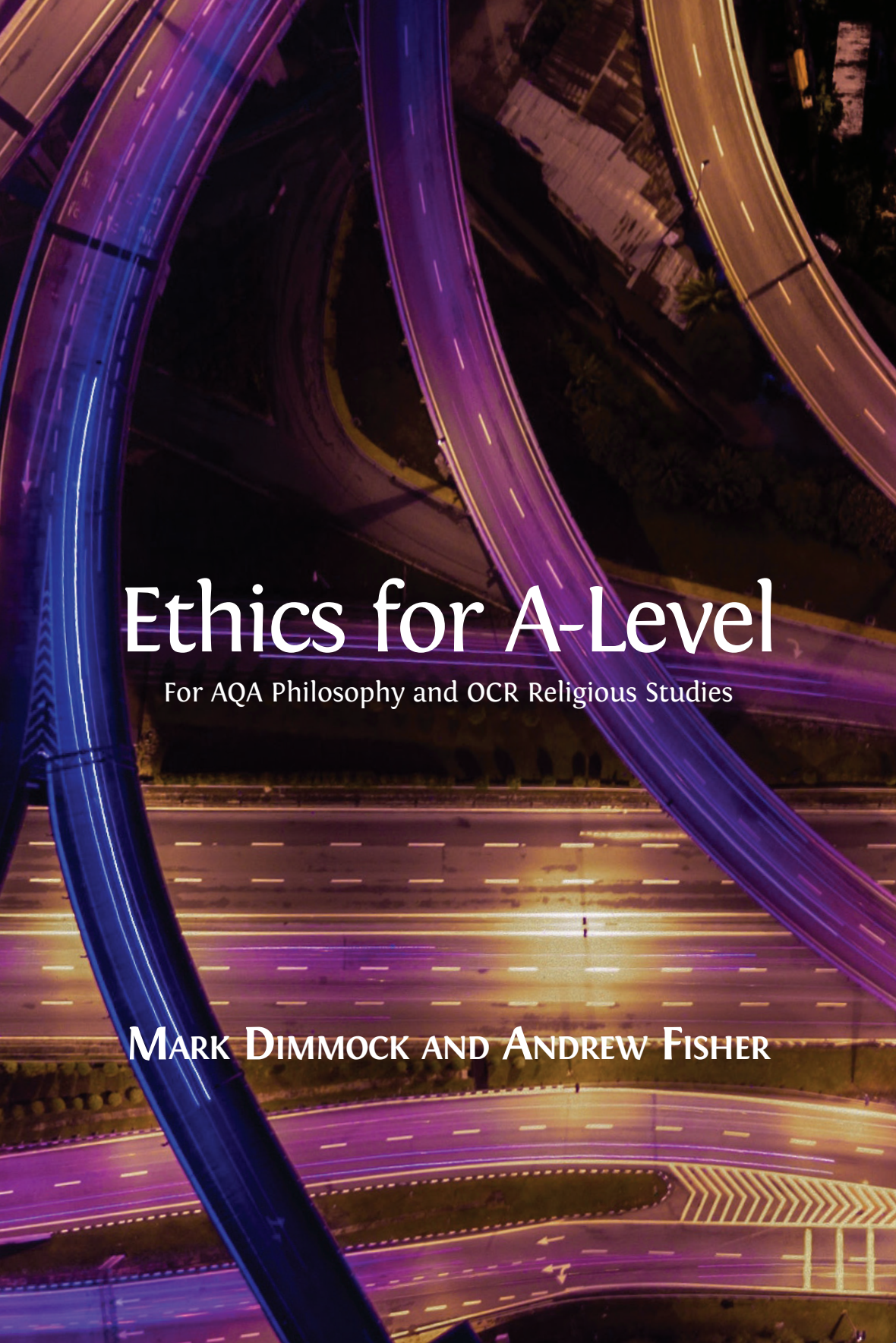


Ethics for A-Level

For AQA Philosophy and OCR Religious Studies

Mark Dimmock and Andrew Fisher

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SAMPLE MATERIAL

OpenBook Publishers

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Preface

1. Exam Specification Details

This book deals with the Ethics components of AQA Philosophy and OCR Religious Studies. It has been written in line with these specifications, covering the material necessary in a way that, we hope, is engaging for students, teachers and anyone interested in understanding ethical study.

Some chapters are, therefore, directly relevant only to one of these two course. Students studying Ethics as part of OCR Religious Studies do not need to read about the ethics of simulated killing, while students studying AQA Philosophy do not need to consider Natural Law or Situation Ethics. This is not to say that there is not, we hope, some independent value in engaging with these chapters as part of your wider reading.

However, the split is not always so clear. Both OCR and AQA require students to engage with the theory of Utilitarianism, for example. However, the specifications differ slightly and so not all of the content is relevant to all students; relevance will depend on the course being sat. We suggest two options in dealing with this:

- Early on in your course—engage with the content in the chapter regardless of your specification. This should give you a full and informed context in which to evaluate the theory.
- Later in your course and nearer exams—use your specification to focus on the exact content that may figure in your exam. Your teacher is best placed to advise you on this.

2. Book Structure

In writing this book we followed Fisher's approach of focusing on the judgement of the student in evaluating when they are being taught effectively.[1] We take the student as authoritative on this matter; we want to create an "engaged" student. To this end we include ways that students can check their judgements on whether the material has taught them anything or not. For example, we include sections on "Common Student Mistakes", "Key Terminology" and focused "Tasks and Questions" within every chapter.

1 Fisher, 'What is Teaching?'. This approach can also be found in: Fisher and Tallant, *How to Get Philosophy Students Talking*.

Following the specification requirements of AQA and OCR, the book deals with *normative ethics*, then *Metaethics* and finally *applied ethics*. What is the difference?

Consider an analogy put forward by **Andrew Fisher** (2011).[2] Imagine that ethics is like football.

- The normative ethicist is like *a referee* interested in the rules governing play. What interests him is the general theories that govern our moral behaviour; how do we work out what is right and what is wrong?
- The metaethicist is like a *football commentator*. What interests her is how the very practice of ethics works. For example, the metaethicist might discuss how people use moral language; or comment on the psychology of immoral people; or ask whether moral properties exist.
- The Applied Ethicists are like *the players.* They "get their hands [or feet] dirty." They take the general rules of normative ethics and "play" under them. What interests them is how we should act in specific areas. For example, how should we deal with issues like meat-eating, euthanasia or stealing?

So guided by the AQA and OCR exam specifications, you will find various *normative* theories explained. You will then find those theories *applied* to real life examples. Sandwiched between these is the *Metaethics* chapter which asks: "But what is ethical practice?"

With all three types of ethics covered we hope to provide a good grounding in ethics, both in terms of content and a general philosophical approach. Where possible we give as many examples as possible and avoid technical jargon, although sometimes we need to use specific philosophical terms. With this in mind we have included an extensive Glossary at the end of the volume. Our hope is that you will feel able to pick up this book dip into it, or read it from cover to cover. Whatever you choose we hope you'll gain confidence with the content needed for your exams, that you practice and strengthen your ability to think with clear reasoning and with justification about the topics covered, and get as excited and fascinated by ethics as we are.

References

Fisher, Andrew, 'What is Teaching?', *Philosophical Studies* (forthcoming).

— *Metaethics: An Introduction* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1017/upo9781844652594

— and Tallant, Jonathan, *How to Get Students Talking: An Instructors Toolkit*

2 Fisher, *Metaethics*, pp. 1-4.

Introduction

1. Philosophy, Ethics and Thinking

Philosophy is hard. Part of the reason it can feel so annoying is because it seems like it should not be hard. After all, philosophy just involves thinking, and we *all* think—thinking is easy! We do it without… well, thinking. Yet philosophy involves not just *thinking*, but *thinking well*. Of course it is true that we *all* think. But thinking, like football, maths, baking and singing is something we can get better at. Unfortunately, people rarely ask *how*. If you do not believe us, then just open your eyes. Society might be a whole lot better off if we thought well, more often.

Admittedly, doing A-Level Philosophy will not give you the ability to solve the problems of the world; we are not that naive! But if you engage with philosophy, then you will be developing yourself as a thinker who thinks *well*. This is why A-Level Philosophy is useful not merely to would-be philosophers, but also to any would be thinkers, perhaps heading off to make decisions in law, medicine, structural engineering—just about anything that requires you to think effectively and clearly.

However, if Philosophy is hard, then Ethics is *really* hard. This might seem unlikely at first glance. After all, Ethics deals with issues of right and wrong, and we have been discussing "what is right" and "what is wrong" since we were children. Philosophy of Mind, on the other hand, deals with topics like the nature of consciousness, while Metaphysics deals with the nature of existence itself. Indeed, compared to understanding a lecture in the Philosophy of Physics, arguing about the ethics of killing in video games might seem something of a walk in the park. This is misleading, not because other areas of philosophy are easy, but because the complexity of ethics is well camouflaged.

2. Respecting Ethics

When you study A-Level *Ethics*, and you evaluate what is right and wrong, it can be tempting and comforting to spend time simply defending your initial views; few people would come to a debate about vegetarianism, or abortion, without some pre-existing belief. If you are open-minded in your ethical approach then you need not reject everything you currently believe, but you

should see these beliefs as *starting points*, or base camps, from which your enquiry commences.

For example, why do you think that eating animals is OK, or that abortion is wrong? If you think that giving to charity is good, what does "good" mean? For true success, ethics requires intellectual respect. If you might think that a particular position is obviously false, perhaps take this reaction as a red flag, as it may suggest that you have missed some important step of an argument—ask yourself why someone, presumably just as intellectually proficient as yourself, might have once accepted that position.

If you are thinking well as an ethicist, then you are likely to have good reasons for your views, and be prepared to rethink those views where you cannot find such good reasons. In virtue of this, you are providing *justification* for the beliefs you have. It is the philosopher's job, whatever beliefs you have, to ask *why* you hold those beliefs. What *reasons* might you have for those beliefs?

For example, imagine the reason that you believe it is OK to eat meat is that *it tastes nice*. As philosophers we can say that this is not a particularly good reason. Presumably it might taste nice to eat your pet cat, or your neighbour, or your dead aunt; but in these cases the "taste justification" seems totally unimportant! The details of this debate are not relevant here (for more on this topic see Chapter 14). The point is that there *are good and bad reasons* for our beliefs and it is the philosopher's job to reveal and analyse them.[1]

3. The A-Level Student

Philosophy is more than just fact-learning, or a "history of ideas." It is different from chemistry, mathematics, languages, theology etc. It is unique. Sure, it is important to learn some facts, and learn what others believed, but a successful A-Level student needs to do more than simply regurgitate information in order to both maneuverer past the exam hurdles and to become a better ethicist.

One aim of this book is to aid you in engaging with a living discipline. Philosophy, and in particular Ethics, is a live and evolving subject. When you study philosophy you are entering a dialogue with those that have gone before you. Learning about what various philosophers think will enable you to become clearer about what *you* think and add to that evolving dialogue.

You will notice that in this book we have not included "hints and tips boxes", or statements of biography concerning the scholars. Although these things have their place, we did not want the reader to think that they have learnt philosophy if they know what is in the boxes.

1 For an excellent introduction to good and bad ways of thinking we recommend John Hospers, 'An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis.'

In reality, university Philosophy departments often work with first year students to lose some of their less academically successful habits. Why? Well, one of the authors has taught ethics at university for many years. Philosophy students often say something like this: "I thought we'd do hard stuff at University! I did Utilitarianism at A-Level, can I have something different to study, please?"

This statement reveals a whole host of things. Most important is the view that to "do" ethics is to remember information. That is why a student can say they have "done Utilitarianism." They have learnt some key facts and arguments. But philosophy is not like this. In order to understand philosophy you need to be authentic with yourself and to ask what *you* think, using this as a guide to critically analyse the ideas learned and lead yourself to your own justifiable conclusion. Philosophy is a living and dynamic subject that we cannot reduce to a few key facts, or a simplistic noting of what other people have said.

Some people distinguish between "ethics" and "morality." We do not. For us, nothing hangs on the difference between them. In this book you will see us switching between the terms, so do not get hung up on this distinction.

4. Doing Ethics Well: Legality versus Morality

Moral questions are distinct from legal questions, although, of course, moral issues might have some implications for the law. That child labour is morally unacceptable might mean that we have a law against it. But it is unhelpful to answer whether something is morally right or wrong by looking to the laws of the land. It is quite easy to see why. Imagine a country which has a set of actions which are *legally* acceptable, but *morally* unacceptable or vice versa—the well-used example of Nazi Germany brings to mind this distinction. Therefore, in discussions about ethics do be wary of talking about legal issues. Much more often than not, such points will be irrelevant.

5. Doing Ethics Well: Prudential Reasons versus Moral Reasons

Something to keep separate are moral reasons and *prudential* reasons. Prudential reasons relate to our personal reasons for doing things.

Consider some examples. When defending slavery, people used to cite the fact that it supported the economy as a reason to keep it. It is true, of course, that this is a reason; it is a prudential reason, particularly for those who benefitted from slavery such as traders or plantation owners. Yet, such a reason does not help us with the moral question of slavery. We would say "OK, but so what if it helps the economy! Is it right or wrong?"

6. Doing Ethics Well: Prescriptive versus Descriptive Claims

Another important distinction is between *descriptive* and *prescriptive* claims. This is sometimes referred to as the "is/ought" gap. We return to this in later chapters, especially Chapter 6. But it is such a common mistake made in general ethical chat that we felt the need to underline it.

Consider some examples. Imagine the headline: "*Scientists discover a gene explaining why we want to punch people wearing red trousers*." The article includes lots of science showing the genes and the statistical proof. Yet, none of this will tells us whether acting violently towards people wearing red trousers is morally acceptable. The *explanation* of why people feel and act in certain ways leaves it open as to how people morally *ought* to act.

Consider a more serious example, relating to the ethics of eating meat. Supporters of meat-eating often point to our incisor teeth. This shows that it is natural for us to eat meat, a fact used as a reason for thinking that it is morally acceptable to do so. But this is a bad argument. Just because we have incisors does not tell us how we morally ought to behave. It might explain why we find it easy to eat meat, and it might even explain why we like eating meat. But this is not relevant to the *moral* question. Don't you believe us? Imagine that dentists discover that our teeth are "designed" to eat other humans alive. What does this tell us about whether it is right or wrong to eat humans alive? Nothing.

7. Doing Ethics Well: Thought-Experiments

You will also be aware, especially in reading this book, of the philosophical device known as a "thought experiment." These are hypothetical, sometimes fanciful, examples that are designed to aid our thinking about an issue.

For example, imagine that you could travel back in time. You are pointing a gun at your grandfather when he was a child. Would it be possible for you to pull the trigger? Or, imagine that there is a tram running down a track. You could stop it, thereby saving five people, by throwing a fat man under the tracks. Is this the morally right thing to do?

The details here are unimportant. What is important, is that it is inadequate to respond: "yes, but that could never happen!" Thought experiments are devices to help us to think about certain issues. Whether they are possible in real life does not stop us doing that thinking. Indeed, it is not just philosophy that uses thought experiments. When Einstein asked what would happen if he looked at his watch near a black hole, this was a thought experiment. In fact, most other subjects use thought experiments. It is just that philosophy uses them more frequently, and they are often a bit more bizarre.

8. Doing Ethics Well: Understanding Disagreement

Finally, we want to draw your attention to a common bad argument as we want you to be aware of the mistake it leads to. Imagine that a group of friends are arguing about which country has won the most Olympic gold medals. Max says China, Alastair says the US, Dinh says the UK. There is general ignorance and disagreement; but does this mean that there is not an answer to the question of "which country has won the most Olympic gold medals?" No! We cannot move from the fact that people disagree to the conclusion that there is no answer. Now consider a parallel argument that we hear far too often.

Imagine that you and your friends are discussing whether euthanasia is morally acceptable. Some say yes, the others say no. Each of you cite how different cultures have different views on euthanasia. Does this fact—that there is disagreement—mean that there is no answer to the question of whether euthanasia is morally acceptable? Again, the answer is no. That answer did not follow in the Olympic case, and it does not follow in the moral one either. So just because different cultures have different moral views, this does not show, by itself, that there is no moral truth and no answer to the question.

If you are interested in the idea that there is a lack of moral truth in ethics, then Moral Error Theorists defend exactly this position in the chapter on Metaethics.

9. Summary

You will not be assessed, by either AQA or OCR, on the core content of this chapter. If any the content is specifically relevant to assessment, it is discussed in proper detail in the following chapters.

Still, we hope that we have signposted some errors to avoid when it comes to thinking about ethics, and some strategies to consider instead. It may be worth occasionally revisiting the ideas discussed here during your studies, to test your own lines of argument and evaluate how "thinking well" is progressing for you. This would not be a weakness! Both the authors, and any honest philosopher, can reassure you—philosophy is hard! We hope you find this textbook useful and rewarding in helping you on your own journey through Ethics.

Questions/Tasks

1. How would you explain what philosophy is to someone?
2. Do you think philosophy is important? If yes, why? If no, why?
3. List some ethical questions.

4. Can you figure out if your questions are Normative, Applied, or Metaethical?
5. Is there a link be between Applied, Normative and Metaethics? Which type of ethics do you think it would be best to study first, and which last?
6. What is the difference between prudential and moral reasons?
7. What is meant by the "is/ought" gap? Why is it important to remember when discussing ethical questions?
8. What role, if any, does science have in ethical arguments?
9. What are thought experiments? Why might they be useful to philosophers?
10. "Because there are so many different views on moral issues there cannot be any moral truth." What do you think of this line of argument?

References

Hospers, John, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, 4th ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203714454

PART I
NORMATIVE ETHICS


Utilitarianism
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Bentham
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Hedonism
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CHAPTER 1

Utilitarianism

Music snobbery is the worst kind of snobbery. It forces people who like something a bit mainstream, a bit of pop like Girls Aloud or Take That! or ABBA to say 'It's my guilty pleasure!' I hate that phrase. It is an insult to top quality pop. It is also an insult to guilt.

Dara Ó Briain (comedian)

1. Utilitarianism: An Introduction

Some things appear to be straightforwardly good for people. Winning the lottery, marrying your true love or securing a desired set of qualifications all seem to be examples of events that improve a person's life . As a normative ethical theory, Utilitarianism suggests that we can decide what is morally right or morally wrong by weighing up which of our future possible actions promotes such goodness in our lives and the lives of people more generally.

2. Hedonism

Hedonism is a theory of well-being—a theory of how well a life is for the person living that life. What separates Hedonism from other theories of well-being is that the hedonist believes that what defines a successful life is directly related to the amount of pleasure in that life; no other factors are relevant at all. Therefore, the more pleasure that a person experiences in their life then the better their life goes, and vice versa. Whereas other theories might focus on fulfilling desires people have, or an objective list of things such as friendship and health.

The roots of Hedonism can be traced back at least as far as **Epicurus** (341-270 BC) and Ancient Greece. Epicurus held the hedonistic view that the primary *intrinsic* good for a person is pleasure; meaning that pleasure is always good for a person in and of itself, irrespective of the cause or context of the pleasure. According to this theory pleasure is always intrinsically good for a person and less pleasure is always intrinsically bad.

Hedonism is a relatively simple theory of what makes your life better. If you feel that your life would be better if you won the lottery, married

your true love or achieved your desired qualifications, then the hedonistic explanation of these judgments is that these things are good for you only if they provide you with pleasure. The pleasures may be physical, but the contemporary Attitudinal Hedonist **Fred Feldman** (1941-) has also made clear that psychological pleasures can count as intrinsically good for a person. So, while reading a book would not seem to produce pleasure in a physical way, a hedonist may value the psychological pleasure associated with that act of reading and thus accept that it can improve a person's well-being. This understanding of hedonistic pleasure may help to explain why, for example, one person can gain so much pleasure from a Lady Gaga album while another gains nothing at all; the psychological responses to the music differ.

3. Nozick's Experience Machine

One important problem for Hedonism is that our well-being seems to be affected by more than just the total pleasure in our lives. It may be the case that you enjoy gaining a new qualification, but there seems to be more to the value of this event than merely the pleasure produced. Many people agree that success in gaining a meaningful qualification improves your life even if no pleasure is obtained from it. Certainly, many believe that the relationship between what improves your life and what gives pleasure is not directly proportional, as the hedonist would claim.

Robert Nozick (1938-2002) attacked the hedonistic idea that pleasure is the only good by testing our intuitions via a now famous thought-experiment. Nozick asks:

> *Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, pre-programming your life experiences? ... Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening... would you plug in?*[1]

Nozick's challenge to Hedonism is based on the thought that most people who consider this possible situation would opt *not* to plug in. Indeed, if you ask yourself if you would actually choose to leave behind your real friends, family and life in favour of a pre-programmed existence you also might conclude that plugging into the experience machine would not be desirable. However, if Hedonism is correct and our well-being is determined entirely by the amount of pleasure that we experience, then Nozick wonders "what else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?"[2] The experience

1 R. Nozick, 'The Experience Machine', p. 292.
2 *Ibid*.

machine guarantees us pleasure yet we find it unappealing compared to a real life where pleasure is far from assured. This may suggest that our well-being is determined by other factors in addition to how much pleasure we secure, perhaps knowledge or friendships.

The hedonists need not give way entirely on this point, of course, as they may feel that the experience machine is desirable just because it guarantees experiences of pleasure. Or, you might believe that our suspicions about the machine are misplaced. After all, once inside the machine we would not suspect that things were not real. You may feel that the hedonist could bite-the-bullet (accept the apparently awkward conclusion as a non-fatal implication of the theory) and say that any reticence to enter the machine is *irrational*. Perhaps the lives of those choosing to be plugged in to the machine would go extraordinary well!

4. The Foundations of Bentham's Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was the first of the "classical utilitarians." Driven by a genuine desire for social reform, Bentham wanted to be as much involved in law, politics and economics as abstract philosophising.

Bentham developed his moral theory of Utilitarianism on the foundation of the type of hedonistic thinking described in section two. For Bentham, the only thing that determines the value of a life, or indeed the value of an event or action, is the amount of pleasure contained in that life, or the amount of pleasure produced as a result of that event or action. Bentham is a *hedonistic utilitarian*. This belief in Hedonism, however, was not something that Bentham took to be unjustified or arbitrary; for him Hedonism could be *empirically justified* by evidence in the world in its favour. According to Bentham:

> *Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.*[3]

Bentham moves from this empirical claim about the factors that guide our behaviour to a normative claim about how we *ought* to live. He creates a moral theory based on the bringing about of more pleasure and less pain.

When first understanding Utilitarianism, it is also crucial to understand what is meant by the term "utility." Bentham defined it as "[…] that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness […] or […] to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness."[4] Utility is thus promoted when pleasure is promoted and when

3 J. Bentham, 'An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation', in *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, p. 65.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

unhappiness is avoided. Bentham's commitment to Hedonism means for him that goodness is just an increase in pleasure, and evil or unhappiness is just an increase in pain or decrease in pleasure. With this understanding of utility in mind, Bentham commits himself to the *Principle of Utility*:

> *By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness.*[5]

In effect, this principle simply says that promoting utility, defined in terms of pleasure, is to be approved of and reducing utility is to be disapproved of.

The Principle of Utility, backed by a commitment to Hedonism, underpins the central utilitarian claim made by Bentham. Based on a phrase that he wrongly attributed to **Joseph Priestley** (1733-1804), Bentham suggests that the measure of right and wrong is the extent to which an action produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Of course, what counts as good, for Bentham, is pleasure. We can then rephrase what Bentham himself call his fundamental axiom as a requirement to *promote the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people, in order to act morally*.

5. The Structure of Bentham's Utilitarianism

In addition to being hedonistic, Bentham's Utilitarianism is also:

1. Consequentialist/Teleological
2. Relativist
3. Maximising
4. Impartial

Bentham's Utilitarianism is *Consequentialist* because the moral value of an action or event is determined entirely by the consequences of that event. The theory is also described as *teleological* for the same reason, based on the Greek word *telos* that means "end" or "purpose." If more pleasure follows as a consequence of "Action A" rather than "Action B", then according to the fundamental axiom of Utilitarianism "Action A" should be undertaken and is morally right; choosing "Action B" would be morally wrong.

In addition, Bentham's Utilitarianism is *Relativistic* rather than *Absolutist*. Absolutist moral views hold that certain actions will always be morally wrong irrespective of context or consequences. For example, many campaigning groups suggest that torture is always morally unacceptable whether it is

5 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

carried out by vindictive dictators seeking to instil fear in a population or whether it is authorised by democratically elected governments seeking to obtain information in order to stop a terrorist attack. For absolutists then, the act of torture is absolutely wrong in all cases and situations.

Clearly, Bentham cannot hold this type of view because sometimes the pain involved in torture may lead to the promotion of greater pleasure (or less intense pain) overall, such as in the case where torture stops a terrorist atrocity. On this basis, the Benthamite utilitarian must believe that whether a certain action is right or wrong is always relative to the situation in which the action takes place.

Bentham's Utilitarianism is *maximising* because it does not merely require that pleasure is promoted, but that the *greatest* pleasure for the *greatest* number is secured. This means that some actions that lead to pleasure will still not be morally good acts if another action that could have produced even more pleasure in that setting was rejected. Thus, for example, if you gain some pleasure from spending money on a new book, but that money could have produced more pleasure had it been donated to a local charity for the homeless, then buying a new book would be morally wrong even though it led to some pleasure because it did not maximise the total amount of pleasure that was possible in that circumstance.

Finally, Bentham's Utilitarianism is also *impartial* in the sense that what matters is simply securing the maximum amount of pleasure for the maximum number of people; the theory does not give special preference regarding which people are supposed to have access to, or share in, that total pleasure. Bentham's utilitarian theory is associated with the idea of *equal consideration of interests*; as long as total pleasure is maximised then it does not matter if that pleasure is experienced by royalty, presidents, siblings, children, friends or enemies. In the total calculation of pleasure, we are all equal regardless of our status, behaviour or any other social factor.

6. Hedonic Calculus

Hopefully it is now clear that for Bentham the consequences in terms of pleasure production of any action are what determine the morality of that action, and that no other factors are relevant. However, it is not clear how exactly we should go about working out what to do in specific cases. For example:

> You are a military airman flying a fighter jet that is about to intercept a passenger airliner that seems to have been hijacked by an as yet unknown figure. The plane appears to be on a path that could take it either to an airport or, potentially, directly to a major and highly populated city. You are tasked with deciding how to act and must, therefore, choose whether or not to fire a missile at the plane. Firing at the plane would kill the passengers but save all lives on

> the ground, yet not firing may save the passengers, or it may give the passengers only a few more minutes before the plane is flown into a city full of innocents and they are killed in any case. Suggesting that the pilot weigh up the options and choose the action that secures the greatest pleasure for the greatest number is not obviously helpful in making such a difficult decision with so many variables.

Bentham recognised that such *Problems of Calculation* relating to the pleasure associated with future actions needed addressing in order for Utilitarianism to be a workable moral theory. Bentham therefore created the Hedonic Calculus (sometimes known as the Felicific Calculus) in order to help an individual work out how much pleasure would be created by differing possible actions. The Hedonic Calculus, as suggested by Bentham, is based on assessing possible pleasures according to their:

1. Intensity
2. Duration
3. Certainty
4. Remoteness (i.e. how far into the future the pleasure is)
5. Fecundity (i.e. how likely it is that pleasure will generate other related pleasures)
6. Purity (i.e. if any pain will be felt alongside that pleasure)
7. Extent (i.e. how many people might be able to share in that pleasure)[6]

The Hedonic Calculus is therefore supposed to provide a decision-procedure for a utilitarian who is confused as to how to act in a morally tricky situation. Thus, our fighter-pilot might consider the intensity of the pleasure of surviving versus the duration of the pain of death, while also needing to balance these factors against the relative certainty of the possible pains or pleasures. No doubt, the fighter pilot would still face an agonising moral choice but it seems that he would at least have some methodology for working out what Utilitarianism morally requires of him.

7. Problems for Bentham's Utilitarianism

However, whether or not measuring possible actions in terms of "units of pleasure" associated with them is actually plausible is very much an open question and so the problem of calculation is not necessarily solved simply by the existence of the Hedonic Calculus. Consider the most recent highly pleasurable experience that you enjoyed and compare it to a highly pleasurable experience from earlier in your life. It may be that you cannot say confidently

6 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

that one provided more pleasure than the other, especially if the experiences were extremely varied; perhaps winning a sporting trophy versus going on your first holiday. Pleasures that are so fundamentally different in nature may simply be incommensurable—they may be incapable of being measured by a common standard such as the Hedonic Calculus.

In addition, the problem of calculation can be extended beyond the issues raised above. Remember that Bentham's Utilitarianism is impartial in the sense that all individuals who gain pleasure as a result of a certain action count towards the total amount of pleasure. However, the following case raises the *Problem of Relevant Beings*:

> You are considering whether or not to approve a new housing development on a piece of unoccupied land outside the current boundary of your town. You are clear that, if approved, the development will create a great deal of pleasure for both new residents and construction workers without any pain being experienced by others. You are aware, however, that the development will require the culling of several badgers and the removal of a habitat currently supporting many birds, stray cats and rodents of various types.

On the surface, this case should be obvious for the utilitarian without any special problem of calculation; the greatest good for the greatest number would be secured if the development were permitted to go ahead. However, this assumes that non-human animals are not relevant to the calculation of pleasures and pains. Yet, if pleasure is all that matters for how well a life goes then it is not clear why animals, that may be able to experience some form of pleasure and can almost certainly experience pain, should be excluded from the calculation process.

Indeed, Bentham, when referring to the moral value of animals, noted that: "The question (for deciding moral relevance) is not 'Can they reason?', nor 'Can they talk?', but 'Can they suffer?'"[7] If the suffering and pain of humans is relevant to moral calculations then surely it is at least plausible that so should the suffering and pain of non-human animals. (There is more on the issue of the moral status of animals in Chapter 14 when the morality of eating animals is investigated.)

Being a maximising ethical theory, Utilitarianism is also open to a *Demandingness Objection*. If it is not the case that pleasure needs to be merely promoted but actually *maximised at all opportunities*, then the standard for acting morally appears to be set extremely high. For example, did you buy a doughnut at some point this year or treat yourself to a magazine? Live the life of a high-roller and treat yourself to a taxi ride rather than walking to your destination? While your actions certainly brought about differing degrees of

7 J. Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML18.html

pleasure to both yourself and to those who gained economic benefit from your decision, it seems that you could have created much more pleasure by saving up your money and ensuring it reached those suffering extreme financial hardships or residing in poverty around the world. As a result of being a maximising moral theory, Utilitarianism seems to make immorality very hard to avoid as it is so utterly demanding on our behaviour.

A further problem for Utilitarianism relates to the *Tyranny of the Majority*. Remember that as a relativistic moral theory, Utilitarianism does not allow for any moral absolutes—such as the absolute right to democracy, or absolute legal or basic human rights. Indeed, Bentham himself dismissed the idea of "natural rights" as a nonsensical concept masqueraded as a meaningful one. However, if we accept that absolute rights are simply "nonsense upon stilts" as Bentham put it, then Utilitarianism seems to be open to cases where the majority are morally required to exploit the minority for the greater good of maximising total pleasure. For example, imagine that total pleasure would be maximised if the resources of a small country were forcibly taken from them to be used freely and exploited by the people of a much larger country (this is hardly unrealistic). However, such forceful theft—only justified by the fact that a greater majority of people would gain pleasure—does not seem to be morally justifiable. Yet, according to Utilitarianism's commitment to maximising pleasure, such an action would not only be morally acceptable but it would be morally required.

As a consequentialist/teleological moral theory Utilitarianism is also open to the *Problem of Wrong Intentions*. This problem can be highlighted by considering the cases of Dominic and Callum.

> Dominic is sat in a coffee shop when a masked intruder bursts in threatening to rob the shop. Dominic, with the intention of saving lives, attempts to stop the intruder but sadly, in the ensuing struggle, the intruder's gun is accidently fired and an innocent person is killed. Now, consider a second case where an intruder bursts in with a gun but Callum, rather than trying to intervene, immediately ducks for cover with the intention of saving himself and leaving the rest of the customers to fend for themselves. Luckily for Callum, when he ducks for cover he accidently trips into the would-be thief, knocking him unconscious thus allowing his peaceful detention until police arrive.

According to the utilitarian calculation, Callum acted in a way that maximised pleasure while Dominic acted wrongly because the consequence of his act was tragic pain. However, it seems unfair and wrong to suggest that Callum acted rightly when he had just intended to save himself, although he had a lucky outcome, while Dominic acted wrongly when his intention was to save others but was unlucky in his outcome. Utilitarianism, as a consequentialist theory, ignores intentions and focuses only on consequences.

Utilitarianism also faces the *Problem of Partiality*. This is clear if we consider the familiar moral dilemma of being stuck on a life raft with three other people

but with only enough supplies for two people. On the raft with you is a doctor who is confident that he can pass on a cure for cancer if he survives, a world class violinist who brings pleasure to millions each year, and one of your parents or siblings. I am afraid to report that, for the purposes of this example, your parent or sibling is nothing special in comparison to other individuals on the raft. In this circumstance, Utilitarianism would seem to require you not only to give up your own space on the raft but ensure that your parent or sibling joins you in the freezing water with no hope of survival; this is the way of maximising total pleasure in such a scenario. Yet, even if you believe that the morality might call for your own self-sacrifice, it seems extremely unfair not to allow you to give *extra moral weight* to the life of a loved one. Unfortunately for the utilitarian, perhaps, the status as a beloved family member should make no special difference to your judgment regarding how to act. This seems to be not only over-demanding but also overly cold and calculating. Utilitarianism requires *Agent-neutrality*—you must look at the situation as any neutral observer would and not give special preference to anyone irrespective of your emotional attachments, because each individual must count for one and no more than one.

Finally, Bentham's Utilitarianism also comes under attack from the related *Integrity Objection*, framed most prominently by **Bernard Williams** (1929-2003). As an agent-neutral theory, no person can give up impartiality when it comes to judgements about the impact of a potential action upon their family or loved ones. In addition, no person can give up impartiality when it comes to the impact of an action upon their own feelings, character and general sense of integrity. In order to make clear the potential worry associated with this, Williams describes the fictional case of Jim and the Indians.[8]

> Jim is an explorer who stumbles upon an Indian leader who is about to execute twenty people. Jim knows nothing of their possible crimes or any other factors involved, but he is offered a difficult choice by the Indian chief who is eager to impress his foreign traveller. Jim can either shoot one of the prisoners himself and then the rest will be set free as a mark of celebration, or he can refuse the offer in which case all twenty prisoners will be executed as was planned. It is key to note that Jim does not have control of the situation in the sense that he is powerless to bargain or negotiate with anyone, and nor can he use a weapon to successfully free any prisoners. He has only the two options laid out.

The point of this example is not to establish what the right action is. You may find yourself in agreement with utilitarians who suggest Jim must shoot one prisoner in order to save the lives of the rest. Rather, the purpose of the example is to show that Utilitarianism forces us to reach this conclusion *too quickly*. Given the commitment to Agent-neutrality, Jim must treat himself as

8 B. Williams, 'Jim and the Indians', https://www.unc.edu/courses/2009spring/plcy/240/001/Jim_and_Indians.pdf

a neutral observer working out which action will produce the greatest good for the greatest number. Morally, he is not entitled to give more weight to his own feelings than he would give to the feelings of any other and therefore it does not matter whether Jim is a pacifist and has been a lifelong advocate for prisoner reform and rehabilitation. If the utilitarian calculation suggests that he must shoot one of the prisoners then he must shoot with no regard to any compromising of his integrity and self-identity. You may accept this as an unfortunate consequence of a terrible situation, but it may be a problem for a moral theory if it fails to recognise or respect a person's most sincere and deepest convictions.

8. Mill's Utilitarian Proof

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was concerned by many of the problems facing the utilitarian theory put forward by Bentham, but as a hedonist he did not wish to see the theory rejected. Mill sought to refine and improve the Benthamite utilitarian theory in order to create a successful version of Hedonistic Utilitarianism.

Mill was so confident about the prospects for a version of Hedonistic Utilitarianism because he believed that there was an empirically backed proof available to support the principle that the greatest happiness/pleasure should always be secured for the greatest number.[9] Mill's proof, much like Bentham's empirical defence of Hedonism, relies on the evidence from observation that people desire their own happiness. This observation of fact supports Mill's claim that since people desire their own happiness, this is evidence that such happiness is desir*able*. Mill says "…each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons."[10] Since our happiness is good for us, and general happiness is just the total of the happiness of all persons, then general happiness is also good. To put it another way, if individual happiness is a good worth pursuing then happiness in general must be worth pursuing.

In order to justify Hedonism, Mill sought to justify the claim that the good of happiness is the *only* thing that makes our lives go better. Mill defends this claim by suggesting that knowledge, health and freedom etc. (as other plausible goods that might make a life go better) are only valuable *in so far as* they bring about happiness. Knowledge is desired only because it provides happiness when acquired, not because it, by itself and in isolation, makes life go better.

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9 This slippage from talk of "pleasure" to talk of "happiness" is explained in section eight of this chapter.

10 J. S. Mill, 'Utilitarianism', in *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, p. 308.

Mill's proof of Utilitarianism in terms of the general desirability of maximising total happiness is, however, open to criticism. For one thing, the fact that something is desired does not seem to justify the claim that it is desirable. **G. E. Moore** (1873-1958) points out that Mill moves from the factual sense that something is desirable if it is desired to the normative sense that it *should* be desired without any justification. It is possible, for example, to desire to kill another person. This is desirable in the sense people could and do desire it (it is possible to do so—it is an action that is desire-*able*), but not in the sense that we would want them to desire it.

In addition, the idea that other apparent goods, such as knowledge and health, are only valuable in so far as they promote happiness/pleasure is extremely controversial; can you imagine a situation in which you gained value from knowledge without any associated pleasure or happiness? If so, you may have a counter example to Mill's claim.

9. Mill's Qualitative Utilitarianism

In attempting to redraw Bentham's Utilitarianism, Mill's most substantial thought was to move away from Bentham's idea that all that mattered was the *quantity* of total pleasure. Instead, Mill thought that *quality* of pleasure was also crucial to deciding what is moral.

Bentham's Utilitarianism is quantitative in the sense that all Bentham focusses on is the maximisation of hedonically calculated quantities of total pleasure. Thus, he says that "Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry."[11] All that matters for Bentham is producing pleasure and the way this is achieved is unimportant. If playing on a console affords you more pleasure than reading Shakespeare, then Bentham would view your life as going better if you play the console. However, Mill introduces a quality criterion for pleasure. Mill says that:

> *It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is only because they only know their own side of the question.*[12]

Bentham could not admit that the unhappy Socrates would be living a life with more value than the happier fool. Mill, on the other hand, believes that *quality*, not merely quantity, of pleasure matters and can therefore defend the claim that Socrates has the better life even by hedonistic standards.

According to Mill, higher pleasures are worth more than lower pleasures. Higher pleasures are those pleasures of the intellect brought about via activities

11 J. Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward*, p. 206, https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=6igN9srLgg8C
12 J. S. Mill, 'Utilitarianism', p. 281.

like poetry, reading or attending the theatre. Lower pleasures are animalistic and base; pleasures associated with drinking beer, having sex or lazing on a sun-lounger. What we should seek to maximise are the higher quality pleasures even if the total pleasure (hedonically calculated via Bentham's calculus) turns out to be quantitatively lower as a result. Justifying this distinction between higher and lower quality pleasures as non-arbitrary and not just an expression of his own tastes, Mill says that *competent judges*, those people who have experienced both types of pleasure, are best placed to select which pleasures are higher and lower. Such competent judges, says Mill, would and do favour pleasures of the intellect over the base pleasures of the body. On this basis, Mill is open to the criticism that many people have both read books and drunk beer and that if given the choice would choose the latter. Whether or not Mill's defence of his supposedly non-prejudiced distinction of higher and lower pleasures is successful is an open question for your evaluation and analysis.

10. Mill's Rule Utilitarianism versus Bentham's Act Utilitarianism

In addition to a difference in views regarding the importance of the quality of a pleasure, Mill and Bentham are also separated by reference to Act and Rule Utilitarianism and although such terms emerged only after Mill's death, Mill is typically considered a rule utilitarian and Bentham an act utilitarian.

An act utilitarian, such as Bentham, focuses only on the consequences of individual actions when making moral judgments. However, this focus on the outcome of individual acts can sometimes lead to odd and objection-raising examples. **Judith Jarvis Thomson** (1929-) raised the problem of the "transplant surgeon."[13]

> Imagine a case where a doctor had five patients requiring new organs to stop their death and one healthy patient undergoing a routine check. In this case, it would seem that total pleasure is best promoted by killing the one healthy patient, harvesting his organs and saving the other five lives; their pleasure outweighs the cost to the formerly healthy patient.

While Bentham does suggest that we should have "rules of thumb" against such actions, for typically they will lead to unforeseen painful consequences, in the case as simply described the act utilitarian appears powerless to deny that such a killing is required in order to maximise total pleasure (just add your own details to secure this conclusion for the act utilitarian).

Rule utilitarians, in whose camp we can place Mill, adopt a different moral decision-procedure. Their view is that we should create a set of rules that, if followed, would produce the greatest amount of total happiness. In the

13 J. J. Thomson, 'The Trolley Problem', p. 1396.

transplant case, killing the healthy man would not seem to be part of the best set of utilitarian-justified rules since a rule allowing the killing of healthy patients would not seem to promote total happiness; one outcome, for example, would be that people would very likely stop coming to hospitals for fear for their life! Therefore, if a rule permitting killing was allowed then the maximisation of total happiness would not be promoted overall.

It is through Rule Utilitarianism that we can make sense of Mill's "Harm Principle". According to Mill, there is:

> *…one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control.*[14]

That principle is:

> *The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.*[15]

Even if a particular act of harming another person might bring about an increase in total pleasure on a single occasion, that act may not be condoned by the set of rules that best promotes total pleasure overall. As such, the action would not be morally permitted.

11. Strong versus Weak Rule Utilitarianism

Rule utilitarians may seem to avoid troubling cases like the transplant surgeon and be able to support and uphold individual human and legal rights based on rules that reflect the Harm Principle. This fact would also help rule utilitarians overcome objections based on the treatment of minorities because exploitation of minority groups would, perhaps, fail to be supported by the best utilitarian-justified set of rules. Yet, rule utilitarians face a troubling dilemma:

1. *Strong Rule Utilitarianism*: Guidance from the set of rules that, if followed, would promote the greatest amount of total happiness must *always* be followed.
2. *Weak Rule Utilitarianism*: Guidance from the set of rules that, if followed, would promote the greatest amount of total happiness can be ignored in circumstances where more happiness would be produced by breaking the rule.

The strong rule utilitarian appears to suffer from what **J. J. C. Smart** (1920-2012) described as "Rule Worship." No longer focussing on the consequences

14 J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, http://www.econlib.org/library/Mill/mlLbty1.html
15 *Ibid*.

of the action before them, the strong rule utilitarian appears to ignore the option to maximise total happiness in favour of following a general and non-relative rule regarding how to act. The strong rule utilitarian may be able to avoid problems based on treatment of minorities or a lack of absolute legal and human rights, but it is not clear that they survive these problems holding on to a teleological, relativistic utilitarian theory. Utilitarianism seems to be saved from troubling implications only by denying core features.

On the other hand, while Weak Rule Utilitarianism retains a teleological nature it appears to collapse into Act Utilitarianism. The rules provide guidelines that can be broken, and given that the act utilitarian can also offer "rules of thumb" against actions that tend not to produce maximum goodness or utility in general, such as killing healthy patients, it is not clear where this version of Rule Utilitarianism gains a unique identity. In what cases would Act Utilitarianism and Weak Rule Utilitarianism actually provide different moral guidance? This is something you should consider in the light of your own examples or previous examples in this chapter.

12. Comparing the Classical Utilitarians

Bentham

- Hedonist
- All pleasure equally valuable
- Act Utilitarian
- Teleological, impartial, relativistic, maximising

Mill

- Hedonist
- Quality of pleasure matters: intellectual versus animalistic
- Viewed as rule utilitarian
- If strong rule utilitarian, not clear if teleological or relativistic
- Impartial, maximising theory

13. Non-Hedonistic Contemporary Utilitarianism: Peter Singer and Preference Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is not a dead theory and it did not end with Mill. **Henry Sidgwick** (1838-1900) is considered to have taken over the baton after Mill, and **R. M. Hare** (1919-2002) was perhaps chief advocate in the mid twentieth century. However, few contemporary philosophers can claim as much

influence in public life outside philosophy as can the preference utilitarian, **Peter Singer** (1946-).

Singer advocates a non-hedonistic version of Utilitarianism. His utilitarian theory is teleological, maximising, impartial and relativistic but he does not claim that the greatest good for the greatest number can be reduced to pleasure in either raw or higher forms. Instead, Singer believes that what improves a person's life is entirely determined by the satisfaction of their preferences. If you satisfy your preference to achieve a good qualification your life goes better *in virtue of satisfying that preference*. If someone else desires to get a job rather than continue in education, their life goes better for them if they secure their preference and gain employment. Individuals, according to Singer, must be at the core of moral thinking:

> *There would be something incoherent about living a life where the conclusions you came to in ethics did not make any difference to your life. It would make it an academic exercise. The whole point about doing ethics is to think about the way to live. My life has a kind of harmony between my ideas and the way I live. It would be highly discordant if that was not the case.*[16]

On this basis, when making moral decisions we should consider how best to ensure the maximisation of total preference satisfaction—it does not matter if our preference satisfaction fails to provide pleasure for us. Continuing to follow Bentham's commitment to impartiality, Singer also supports equal weighing of preferences when deciding which action better promotes greater preference satisfaction; all preferences are to weigh equally. This potentially leaves Singer open to the same issues that plagued Bentham. Namely, regarding circumstances where partiality seems desirable, or when the preferences of the majority seem to threaten a minority group, or require us to sacrifice our integrity. Further, the problem of calculation also seems to be relevant, because it is not obvious how you could work out the preferences of others in at least some difficult moral cases (let alone the preferences of animals, if they are also relevant).

In response to a concern regarding the moral relevance of satisfying bloodthirsty or apparently immoral preferences, and counting such satisfaction as a moral achievement (consider the preferences of a nation of paedophiles, for example), we might look to the ideas of **Richard Brandt** (1910-1997). Brandt, writing about the rationality of certain preferences, suggested that rational preferences were those that might survive cognitive psychotherapy.[17] However, there is a question as to how arbitrary this requirement is and whether or not some unnerving preferences might form the core of certain individual characters therefore being sustained even after such therapy.

16 K. Toolis, 'The Most Dangerous Man in the World', https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/1999/nov/06/weekend.kevintoolis

17 R. Brandt, *Ethical Theory*.

SUMMARY

Utilitarianism remains a living theory and retains hedonistic and non-hedonistic advocates, as well as supporters of both act and rule formulations. The core insight that consequences matter gives the theory some intuitive support even in the light of hypothetical cases that pose serious problems for utilitarians. The extent to which the different versions of Utilitarianism survive their objections is very much up to you as a critically-minded philosopher to decide.

COMMON STUDENT MISTAKES

- Not reflecting the attitudinal aspect of pleasure that Bentham's theory may account for.
- Minimising the long-term impact of actions when it comes to pleasure/pain production.
- Imprecise understanding of the hedonic/non-hedonic split in Utilitarianism.
- Imprecision in use of examples to defend/challenge Utilitarianism.
- Suggesting that "Jim and the Indians" is not a counterexample to Utilitarianism simply because you judge killing the fewer number of people is ultimately the morally right thing to do.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

1. Is there anything that would improve your lifethat cannot be reduced to either pleasure or preference satisfaction?
2. Would you enter Nozick's experience machine if you knew you would not come out? Would you put someone you care about into the machine while they were asleep, so that they never had to make the decision?

3. Can pleasure be measured? Does Bentham go about this task correctly?
4. Which is the most serious problem facing Bentham's Act Utilitarianism? Can it be overcome?
5. Does Mill successfully improve Bentham's Act Utilitarianism in any way?
6. Are you ever told to stop watching television and do something else? Is this good for you? Why?
7. Look at the quote at the start of the chapter by Dara Ó Briain—is it possible that some pleasures are inferior in value to others?
8. Do you have convictions or beliefs you would not want to sacrifice for the greater good, should you ever be forced to?
9. Why do utilitarians not give up on the idea of maximising pleasure and just talk in terms of promoting sufficient pleasure? Would this solve or raise problems?
10. Is Weak Rule Utilitarianism merely Act Utilitarianism by another name?
11. Does Strong Rule Utilitarianism deserve to be labelled as a utilitarian theory?
12. If your preferences change after psychotherapy, did the original preferences ever matter?

KEY TERMINOLOGY

Normative
Relativistic
Teleological
Consequentialist
Principle of Utility
Agent-neutrality
Hedonic Calculus
Utility
Intrinsic

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