

# OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN MORAL CHOICE

Paper for discussion at meeting of South London Philosophy Circle on 2 July 2023

## Scope

What are the distinguishing features of the individual and collective *moral* choices which we make in our lives i.e. those regarding what we *should* or *shouldn't* do? Are there *objective* criteria by which such choice can be made or is it necessarily *subjective* and so liable to vary from one person to another? Are some things just right or wrong in themselves or should they be judged by their likely *consequences* and, if so, how can these be evaluated? What are the key characteristics of different approaches to morality (e.g. *virtue ethics* and *utilitarianism*) and what might be the role of reason, emotion, aesthetic sensibility and religious belief? The papers *Moral Certainty or Moral Relativism?* and *What's So Good About Happiness?* examine these issues and can be accessed on the Kingston Philosophy Cafe website: <https://e-voice.org.uk/kingstonphilosophycafe/>

On the menus click in turn on: Our Files / Philosophy Cafe discussions / Papers by Roger Jennings. These papers are listed alphabetically. *What's So Good About Happiness?* is listed under the title *Happiness*.

## The nature of moral choice

Moral/ethical issues concern how we *should* or *shouldn't* behave and can arise, therefore, only if we have some *choice* in the matter. In practice, choice-making is unavoidable even for the most convinced of determinists<sup>1</sup>. As a starting point, it is taken for granted that we exercise a limited freedom to make choices based upon our judgement of what is good or bad, better or worse. Most of our daily choices (e.g. what to eat for supper) are minor, if not trivial, and not obviously moral in nature. For vegetarians, however, whether or not to eat meat is a moral issue and for many religions eating certain animals is taboo. A distinguishing feature of moral choice, arguably, is that it may affect or concern not only ourselves but other people, other conscious/sentient beings or, if we are religiously inclined, one or more 'gods'. Approaches to moral choice can be divided broadly into:

- those which suppose the *objective* existence of rules, standards or inherent qualities which tell us what is good or bad and which we are morally bound to apply in our choice-making;
- those which hold that making moral choices requires us to identify and evaluate their likely *consequences* – the key issue being the basis for such evaluation and how this might differ *subjectively* between individuals.

What follows comprises, in the main, edited extracts from the two papers referred to above.

## Religion as a source of moral guidance

Most people worldwide appear to view religion as the primary source of moral instruction. Deriving moral rules in this way, however, raises major problems. In listing these below, reference is made, for the sake of convenience, to the type of 'God' to be found in monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam but they apply to any religion that seeks to derive moral guidance from the supposed existence of one or more 'gods' or 'divine spirits'.

1. The putative words of God are not conveyed to us directly but through human intermediaries (e.g. through prophets such as Moses and Mohammed) who claim to be the chosen vehicles for divine communication. Why believe such claims? Even if we accept the existence of prophets, how do we distinguish true from false ones?
2. God's commandments can be ambiguous. How, for example, should Jews and Christians interpret the sixth commandment: 'You shall not kill' (Exodus 20:13)? With a few exceptions (notably Quakers) they do not take it to mean that killing is wrong under all circumstances and that we should therefore be pacifists. Most, for example, believe that killing one's enemies in times of war, although regrettable, is justified.
3. Different messages within the recognised texts of a religion may conflict with each other. How, for example, can the revengeful Old Testament precept of "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21:23-24) be reconciled with the forgiving approach of Jesus in the New Testament when he urges "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also". (Luke 6: 27-29. See also Matthew 5: 38-45). Choices have to be made and in

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<sup>1</sup> Searle (2004) argues: "Whenever we make up our minds, we have to presuppose freedom. If, for example, I am in a restaurant and I am confronted with a menu and the waiter asks me what I would like, I cannot say 'I'm a determinist, I'll just wait and see what happens', because even that utterance is only intelligible to me as an exercise of my free will... Whenever we decide or act voluntarily, which we do throughout the day, we have to decide or act on the presupposition of our own freedom. Our deciding or acting are unintelligible to us otherwise."

practice people are liable to adopt a 'pick and mix' approach selecting the precepts they find most attractive or perhaps most convenient.

4. A fundamental objection to religion as a source of morality is a conceptual one. Are God's commandments about the ways in which we should behave simply arbitrary or are there reasons behind them? If reasons exist then it is the *reasons* (which potentially we could discover for ourselves) that require us to behave in those ways. God becomes a moral irrelevance. This has been referred to as the 'Euthyphro' dilemma. In the dialogue of the same name, Socrates according to Plato (c.400BC) questions whether it is the fact that the gods love something that makes it good or whether it is the fact that it is good that makes it loved by the gods.
5. Related to the above is the argument that an 'ought' cannot be derived from an 'is'. We cannot conclude that we ought to behave in certain ways simply from the fact that God tells us so to behave.
6. A further related point is that it is possible to imagine disagreeing with God. Suppose, for example, that two Christians with opposing interpretations of the sixth commandment (i.e. one believing that killing is wrong under all circumstances and the other that it is justified under certain circumstances) are able to ask God which is correct. Whatever the answer, one Christian is bound to disagree. If we accept that what is right is what God says is right then such disagreement should not be possible.
7. To behave in certain ways just because God so commands can be seen as morally repugnant. We are reduced, in effect, to abandoning our own judgement and simply 'obeying orders'. Was Abraham, for example, acting morally when he blindly obeyed God's instructions and prepared to sacrifice his only son Isaac (see Genesis 22)? He passed the test of faith but surely failed to act as a moral agent.

It can be seen from the above that religious belief does not provide an assured and uncontentious source of moral guidance. The large minority of non-believers who may find the various 'god hypotheses' to be unclearly formulated, internally contradictory, morally repugnant or lacking any evidential basis have, in any case, to look elsewhere.

## Virtue Ethics

So-called *virtue ethics* concerns the character dispositions or traits that might be regarded as virtues or vices. The word 'ethics', in fact, derives from a Greek word meaning 'matters concerned with character'. Aristotle (c. 325BC) defines virtue as "a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions" and as "a mean state between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency". The virtue of courage, for example, is seen as the mean between the extremes of rashness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency). For Aristotle, virtuous conduct has to be cultivated through practice and provides the means to achieve the fulfilment of 'the human function', which is above all to exercise reason (rather as the function of a knife is to cut). The ultimate goal is the achievement of 'eudaimonia', a state of well-being in which all aspects of human functioning are perfectly realised.

Even if it is accepted that humans possess an essential 'function', there may be disagreement as to what this might be. The biological function of humans, arguably, is simply to survive long enough to reproduce. The objective existence of virtues and vices, moreover, is not universally accepted and people who do accept their existence do not necessarily agree about what counts as a virtue or a vice. The virtues discussed by Aristotle, for example, very much reflect the ethos of fourth-century BC Athenian society. Courage is viewed narrowly in terms of bravery in battle and some of the virtues identified by him (for example 'greatness of soul') would not be recognised today.

Foot (1978) argues that the moral value attaching to recognised virtues such as prudence, temperance, courage and justice pertains to the attributes themselves rather than expressing any 'commendation', 'prescription' or 'pro-attitude' arising from a separate process of evaluation. We do not, the argument goes, identify behaviour as courageous and then separately judge whether or not courage is good thing. If we recognise a virtue like courage we are recognising something with intrinsic value which arises from its functional 'benefit' at least to the possessor and possibly to others. But how do we recognise this? Do they possess an inherent *quality* (e.g. of 'courageousness' or 'selfishness') which we detect through a form of moral intuition – rather as Moore (1903) argues that 'goodness' is detectable as a 'non-natural' quality in things and not to be equated with a 'natural' phenomenon such as happiness. This does not appear, however, to be the position of virtue ethicists. Rather they argue that the modes of behaviour we call 'virtues' have intrinsic value specifically because they promote 'human flourishing'. Such flourishing is associated with living or acting 'well'. Foot, for example, argues "If someone were to say that courage was not a virtue he would have to say that it was not a quality by which a man came to act well". The underlying belief of virtue ethics appears to be that humans can function 'well' only by acting in certain ways and that these, therefore, constitute virtues. Vices on the other hand are those forms of behaviour that impair such functioning (just as an injury to the eye impairs the function of sight).

Key arguments against the validity or usefulness of virtue ethics can be summarised as follows.

1. The concept of 'human 'flourishing' is hopelessly vague. In the social, as opposed to the biological, field no immutable set of 'human functions' can be identified requiring particular patterns of behaviour.
2. Virtue ethics fails to recognise the crucial descriptive/prescriptive dichotomy that in practice applies to moral discourse. It 'objectifies' what are, in fact, contestable human value judgements and presents them as 'givens' pre-determined by supposed human functional requirements. It thus diverts argument about what we consider should or should not be the case to fruitless speculation about what is or is not the case (e.g. whether something does or does not exemplify a virtue).
3. People can differ in what they count as virtues and vices. This supports the argument that virtues and vices have no objective reality but are simply projections of our own values and prejudices.
4. Many of the conventional virtues relate to abstract 'feel good' concepts with which we can express agreement. There is widespread disagreement, however, as to how they are to be evidenced in concrete situations. We are all in favour of 'justice' but in real life one person's justice is another's injustice. What in practice, for example, constitutes a 'just' distribution of income? We can all approve of 'generosity' in principle but in practice what proportion of our income do we have to give to the needy in order to qualify as 'generous'?
5. Virtue ethics provides no obvious basis or method for approaching many moral issues. How, for example, could notions of virtues and vices be applied to deciding how medical cases should be prioritised for treatment? In general our choices concern which of a range of alternative course of action will produce the *best* outcomes.
6. Virtue ethics appears strangely silent on many key moral issues. 'Human flourishing', it might be thought, requires above all the equal opportunity of every individual to participate fully in society. One might, therefore, expect there to be a cardinal virtue of treating all people equally regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, disability or belief. The cardinal virtue of 'justice', might be, but in practice has not been, interpreted in this way. The absence of such a virtue in Aristotle's ethics, of course, is hardly surprising as the majority of the Athenian population were denied fundamental rights because they were either slaves or women.

### **Kant's 'Categorical Imperative'**

Kant (1788, 1797) argues that we act morally by observing the overriding principle or 'Categorical Imperative' that "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law". This would imply, for example, that we should not tell lies unless we were prepared to accept that telling lies should become a standard practice throughout society. 'Reason', he supposes, would cause us to reject such a conclusion. Another formulation of the Categorical Imperative put forward by Kant is: "So act that you use humanity ... always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means".

Why, it could be asked, should we accept Kant's basic principle i.e. that we should act only in accordance with rules which we would be prepared to see universally applied? If we thought we could get away with it, for example, why shouldn't we act dishonestly towards others whilst at the same time insisting they act honestly towards us? Kant would argue that to behave in this way would involve us in an inherent contradiction that offends against reason. It is certainly hard to see how we could openly justify such behaviour. We would be forced to become hypocrites, publicly advocating honesty whilst secretly acting dishonestly.

Whilst we may agree with Kant that behaving morally involves the *universal* application of set rules we may differ widely about what those rules should be or the relevant situations to which they should be applied. Kant, for example, thinks it self-evident that murderers should be put to death. Clearly this is not universally accepted and many countries, including the United Kingdom, have abolished capital punishment.

### **Moral language as the expression of *universalizable* prescriptive statements**

Hare (1952, 1963, 1988) argues that moral language is both *prescriptive* and *descriptive*. It 'prescribes' in the sense that it gives, or at least implies, advice. To say something is good is to recommend it. To say it is bad is to warn against it. At the same time moral language also 'describes' in the sense that the words used have to be applied *consistently* in accordance with set rules. If we describe something as 'red' we are committed to describing anything with the same colour also as 'red'. In the same way, if we describe something as 'good' we are committed to describing anything with the same relevant characteristics also as 'good'. This leads Hare to conclude that moral language expresses *universalizable* prescriptive statements. If, for example, we say that it is right for ourselves to behave in a certain way then we are committed to saying it is right for others to behave in the same way (unless we can identify *relevant* ways in which we differ from them and so different rules legitimately apply to us).

It is possible to see similarities between the above and the Christian precept: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" (Matthew 7:12. See also Luke 6:31), sometimes paraphrased as: "Do as you would be done by". A negative version of this principle was expressed by the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BC) who said: "Do not do to others what you would not wish they should do to you". A clear assumption here is that we are not fundamentally different from other people and that their desires and needs are much the same as ours. 'Do as you would be done by' could be a dangerous thing to recommend to a masochist!

The pre-eminence attributed to the *autonomy* of individual moral judgement in *existentialist* philosophy is not incompatible with *universalising* such judgement. Sartre (1946) states: "I bear the responsibility of the choice which, in committing myself, also commits the whole of humanity... In this sense we may say that there is a human universality, but it is not something given; it is being perpetually made". Hare (1963) argues that existentialism has been misinterpreted by some as implying that an *isolated* choice, uninformed by any other, has to be made in *all* situations. He points out the absurdity of this interpretation. "If some British admirers of the Existentialists were to be followed ... we should say to ourselves that people, and the situations in which they find themselves, are unique, and that therefore we must approach every new situation with a completely open mind and do our moral thinking *ab initio*. This is an absurd prescription, only made plausible by concentrating our attention, by means of novels and short stories, on moral situations of extreme difficulty and complexity, which really do require a lot of consideration. It is important to realise that there are moral problems of this kind; but if *all* moral questions were treated like this, not only should we never get round to considering more than the first few that we happened to encounter, but any kind of moral development or learning from experience would be quite impossible. What the wiser among us do is to think deeply about the crucial moral questions, especially those that face us in our own lives; but when we have arrived at an answer to a particular problem, to crystallise it into a not too specific or detailed form, so that its salient features may stand out and serve us again in a like situation without need for *so much* thought. We may then have time to think about *other* problems, and shall not continually be finding ourselves at a loss about what we ought to do."

### **Morality as the *combined* product of reason and emotion**

The conflict of opinion on many moral issues suggests that moral principles are not self-evident nor can they be arrived at simply through a process of reasoning. Hume (1739) recognises this when he argues that "reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions" i.e. that whilst reasoning may help us explore the likely consequences of possible actions, it is ultimately our feelings and emotions which enable us to choose between them. This is not to say that our moral attitudes represent instant and unthinking emotional responses to specific events – sometimes referred to as *Emotivism* or 'Boo/Hooray' morality. Rather, they are developed and refined as we examine and explore our feelings about real and imagined situations. In this process we may identify inconsistencies that can be resolved only by modifying our moral position. We may also come to understand better the reasons for our emotional responses, distinguishing between 'ends' – valued for their *own* sake – as opposed to 'means' – valued only because they lead to desired ends. Such a process enables us to develop a coherent set of principles which we can apply to future choice, *consistency* of choice being a hallmark of *moral* choice. Crucial to moral choice is the ability to *imagine* and *care* about the feelings of other people. Their pleasure and pain thus becomes, to an extent, our pleasure and pain. As Hume (1739) comments, "No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathise with others and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to, our own". This has implications for moral approaches which assess choices upon the basis of their *outcomes* and the likely impact of these upon existing/future populations of humans and, perhaps, of other sentient beings.

### **Consequentialism**

*Consequentialist* approaches to moral choice entail:

1. identifying the likely *outcomes* of alternative courses of action;
2. *evaluating* those outcomes in relation to desired *ends*.

Outcomes to be identified and evaluated include any arising from possible *means*. Thus consequentialism does *not* hold that ends necessarily justify means (e.g. that deterring theft and preventing re-offence by cutting off the hands of offenders necessarily justify the appalling mutilation and other harm resulting from the means). Issues relating to the identification of likely outcomes are largely *practical* whilst those relating to their evaluation are largely *conceptual*. Crucial are the criteria for evaluating which is the *best* of a range of alternatives taking into account the *nature*, *intensity*, *incidence* (i.e. impact upon *different* individuals) and *timing* of their predicted consequences.

## Utilitarianism

The outstanding example of a consequentialist approach to moral choice is *utilitarianism*. When faced with a range of alternatives, it maintains, we should choose whichever will maximise human *happiness* or, in some versions, the meeting of human *preferences*. The aim of utilitarianism is often summed up as the achievement of *the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people*. Obvious issues arise regarding the *definition* and *quantification* of 'happiness/unhappiness' as well as their *quality, timing, and distribution* between people.

Bentham (1789) argues that people's happiness or unhappiness is measurable in terms of the *total value* of the pleasures and pains which they experience and that the value of each pleasure or pain is determined by its *intensity* and *duration*. When evaluating the *future* pleasures/pains arising from some act, account also has to be taken of their: *certainty/uncertainty* (i.e. the *probability* of their occurrence); *nearness/remoteness* (i.e. the *timing* of their occurrence); *fecundity* (i.e. the extent to which initial pleasures and pains generate further pleasures and pains); *purity* (i.e. the extent to which initial pleasures beget only further pleasures and initial pains only further pains). Separate calculations are needed for each person liable to be affected by the act. The calculated totals for their pleasures and pains can then be summed to show their *extent* i.e. their overall impact upon the community concerned. If the value of pleasures exceeds that of pains, the act can be considered good. If the reverse is the case, it can be deemed bad. For Bentham's own summary of the process, see page 8.

Bentham's formulation raises an immediate issue. Should we aim to maximise a) the total value of the pleasures that people experience (a *gross* measure) or b) the amount by which the value of their pleasures exceeds the value of their pains (a *net* measure). The following example illustrates the problem.

[illegible]

If options X and Y represent *alternative* initiatives, which should we choose? Option X delivers a third more total pleasure than does option Y but only half the *surplus* of pleasure over pain.

An alternative aim to the maximisation of pleasure (whether gross or net) is the *minimisation of pain*, an approach sometimes characterised as *negative utilitarianism*. On this basis we would choose whatever option delivers the *least pain* (option Y in the above example), never mind how much pleasure it also produces. Short of this, we could apply a weighting factor that increases the scores for pains relative to those for pleasures. However, things are rarely simple. Bentham (1789) recognises that one kind of mental pain results from feeling *deprived of pleasures*. He states: "Pains of privation are the pains that can result from the thought of not possessing now any of the various kinds of pleasures." Mill (1863) similarly regards the absence of pleasure as a source of unhappiness and thus as a kind of pain, defining happiness as "pleasure and the absence of pain" and unhappiness as "pain and the privation of pleasure". The only way to *reduce* the 'pains of privation' might seem to be to *increase* the availability of the relevant pleasures, thus blurring the distinction between positive and negative utilitarianism.

Crucial to Bentham's calculus is the feasibility of applying a *common* measure of *value* to disparate pleasures and pains and, in particular, to their *intensity*. Bentham recognises that pleasures and pains come in many different kinds, both *mental* and *physical*, and impact differently upon different people. Any measure of *intensity* needs to take into account the *subjectivity* of the experience of pleasure/pain and appears to require the use of an *ordinal* scale. We might note here that The National Well-being Survey (started in 2011 and now included in the Annual Population Survey) asks people, on a scale of 0 to 10, "overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?" To put flesh on the bones of Bentham's calculus, here is an example of how it might be applied to a particular pleasure and a particular pain which, due to some act, an individual is expected to experience. The following assumptions are made: on a 10 point scale, the *intensity* (**I**) of the pleasure for the individual concerned is 10 and of the pain 5; the expected *duration* (**D**) of the pleasure is 8 hours and of the pain 50 hours; the pleasure is guaranteed whereas the probability (**P**) that the pain will occur is only 40%; the pleasure is expected to occur immediately but the pain only in 3 years' time; a discount factor (**F**) based upon an annual compound rate of 10% is used to calculate the present value of non-immediate pleasures/pains.

$$\mathbf{I} \times \mathbf{D} = \mathbf{V}$$

$$I \times D \times P \times F = V$$

The value (**V**) for the **pleasure** =  $10 \times 8 = 80$       and for the **pain** =  $5 \times 50 \times 0.4 \times 1/1.1^3 = 75$

This particular pleasure/pain pair, therefore, is estimated to provide more pleasure than pain for the individual. However, it can be seen that only slight changes in some of the assumed values could easily reverse the result.

A factor not *specifically* included in Bentham's calculus is the *quality* of pleasures. Mill (1863) considers that the quality of pleasures is at least as important as their quantity and that people who have experienced a range of pleasures will come to prefer the 'higher' to the 'lower' – hence his dictum: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied". An allowance for this might be made by including in the calculations *quality factors* which give greater weight to higher than to lower pleasures. But who decides which are the higher and which the lower and what should be their relative weights? Some self-appointed arbiter of taste? Bentham appears to envisage his calculus being applied *objectively* by an *impartial* analyst who simply identifies the pleasure/pain outcomes which, for whatever reason, people will *actually* experience (the key problem being how to gauge their likely intensity, duration, etc.) and who does not seek to impose her/his own value judgements regarding their 'quality'. Arguably, the quality of any pleasure *for any given individual* is already reflected in the *intensity* with which she/he experiences it and, where there is an option, *for how long*, if at all, she/he *chooses* to experience it (i.e. in its *duration*).

Bentham's calculus is easily dismissed as an academic curiosity that would be impossible to apply in practice. The worked example above involves a single pleasure and a single pain experienced by a single individual. How could such calculations be applied to the myriad of pleasures/pains experienced by, potentially, millions of people, how could such pleasures/pains be identified and how could the required values (e.g. for *intensity*) be established? The calculus serves, nevertheless, to identify the *type* of factors that we generally *do*, in practice, take into account when making decisions about what we individually or collectively should do, even if we can't put precise values upon them. Elements of the calculus, moreover, *are* used in a number of contexts. In deciding what treatments should be funded by the NHS, for example, account is taken of the degree (*intensity*) of improvement they will make to the well-being of individual patients, how far their lives will be extended (and thus the likely *duration* of such improvement) and the number of people affected (and thus the overall *extent* of the benefit received). Many decisions, including end-of-life decisions, moreover, focus upon the *quality of people's lives*, the assessment of which seems bound to take into account, if not to be determined by, the future pleasure/pain balance that, depending upon their level of consciousness, the individuals concerned are considered most likely to experience.

Utilitarianism has had a profound influence in the field of economics. In the 19th century the concept of utility came to be applied to the happiness/satisfaction that people derive from purchased goods and services. Edgeworth (1881) suggests this could be measured in terms of the *intensity* and *duration* of pleasure afforded (compare this with Bentham's calculus). "Any individual experiencing a unit of pleasure-intensity during a unit of time is to 'count for one'... A mass of utility ... is greater than another when it has more *intensity-time-number* units." The assumption of *diminishing marginal utility* (i.e. that the more we consume of anything over a given time period the less satisfaction we get from each increment) has egalitarian implications. It implies that if we transfer income from rich to poor people, the happiness lost by the former is more than outweighed by the happiness gained by the latter. The utilitarian principle of maximising happiness thus supports the case for income redistribution. As Robinson (1962) argues, it "points to egalitarian principles, justifies Trade Unions, progressive taxation, and the Welfare State, if not more radical means to interfere with an economic system that allows so much of the good juice of *utility* to evaporate out of commodities by distributing them unequally."

It is possible to identify utilitarian justification for some forms of behaviour commonly deemed 'virtuous'. Singer (1993) links the behaviour patterns encouraged or discouraged by specific societies to "the conditions under which they must live and work in order to survive." He argues that some ethical standards are 'universal' in the sense of being "beneficial to the community in virtually any conditions in which humans live", observing that "a society in which members of the community are permitted to kill each other with impunity would not last long" and that "conversely, the parental virtues of caring for children, and other virtues like honesty, or loyalty to the group, would foster a stable and lasting community." Non-universal standards, however, may need to change as conditions change. Over-population and the by-products of economic growth, Singer suggests, call for the development of a "new environmental ethic" which "would find virtue in saving and recycling resources, and vice in extravagance and unnecessary consumption." Singer, a preference utilitarian, seems happy to employ the language of virtue ethics. His argument that 'universal' ethical standards are those that are almost always 'beneficial to the community' parallels, it seems, the argument that the 'virtues' are behaviours that are intrinsic to human 'flourishing'. Singer's 'new environmental ethic', it should be noted, raises the issue of the extent to which preference utilitarianism can be based upon an assessment of *actual* preferences. What if the majority preference is for waste and conspicuous consumption? We may try to balance present with future preferences but how do we know what these will be and how far into the future do we try to go? At best we can only guess at the likely future preferences and interests of ourselves and of people yet unborn.

A possible objection to utilitarianism is that it fails to support the moral distinction conventionally made between 'acts' and 'omissions'. If behaviour is to be judged solely by its consequences, then an omission (e.g. the deliberate failure to save a human life) is on a moral par with an act (e.g. the deliberate taking of a human life), assuming the results are the same (e.g. the death of a human being). Some utilitarians have met this criticism head-on by contesting the validity of the acts/omissions distinction. Glover (1977), for example, argues that the "conventional difference of moral evaluation is defensible to the extent that it reflects differences of side-effects" (e.g. direct killing might have a worse impact, compared with allowing a preventable death, upon our sense of security or respect for human life) but should be rejected "in so far as it results from thinking that an act and deliberate omission with *identical* consequences can vary in moral value". He states: "The utilitarian does not deny that killing someone might have worst total consequences than letting someone die has. But he does claim that, in arguing which is morally worse, we should go directly to the different consequences rather than base our view on a general principle about acts and omissions". Glover recognises that "to deny the acts and omissions doctrine is to propose a radical and very demanding morality". Potentially, for example, it puts "failing to send money to Oxfam...in the same league as murder".

### **'Individualist consequentialism' provides some scope for moral certainty and avoids moral relativism**

Any utilitarian assessment of outcomes cannot avoid value judgement on the part of the individual making the assessment. Inevitably this involves 'discounting' some pleasures and preferences. Pleasures derived from pursuits which the individual considers trivial, wasteful or pernicious might be totally discounted. A more radical conclusion follows if we recognise that it is possible to be a *non-utilitarian* consequentialist. Judging moral choices by their outcomes does not require these to be evaluated in terms of maximising happiness or the fulfilment of preferences. Although the happiness and preferences of others are likely to be taken into account, they do not have to be given pre-eminence. We might be influenced at least as much by 'aesthetic' considerations e.g. might simply find conspicuous consumption 'in bad taste'. Whilst not wanting anyone to be in pain we might be suspicious of the value of 'being happy', particularly if this is associated with self-satisfaction. We may consider that the absence of any feeling of happiness is better than what we consider to be *false* happiness (e.g. the drug-induced happiness of a Brave New World society). We may be deeply suspicious, indeed, of nirvana-like states of passive contentment and consider that the human condition should be one of endlessly striving for understanding and intellectual truth even if the price of this is an underlying, albeit low-level, feeling of discontent. If we are followers of 'Gaia', we might care more about the survival of the whole planet (including all animals, trees, plants, rocks and stones) than of the human species, particularly given the nature of human environmental impact. In short, we are free to bring to our evaluation of the outcomes of moral choices whatever considerations we wish, giving full reign to our rational, emotional, aesthetic and imaginative faculties. Such an approach might be termed *individualist consequentialism*.

An objection to such an approach is that, if we all decide individually what is right or wrong, there will be no moral certainty. The objection is partly based on the false assumption that the alternatives (such as obtaining our moral guidance from the 'word of god', pre-existent 'duties' or a set of functionally determined 'virtues') offer any such certainty. All they offer are rival claims to 'privileged insight'. A related objection is that if morality is a just matter of individual choice then potentially 'anything goes' and we lapse inevitably into moral relativism. Nothing could be further from the truth. The approach under discussion represents, in fact, the very opposite of relativism. It allows us to steer between what Blackburn (2001) describes as "the soggy sands of relativism and the cold rocks of dogmatism". The fact that we know that other people think differently does not stop us believing what we believe, any more than knowing we think differently stops them from believing what they believe. We may, for example, be absolutely certain that the denial to women of rights available to men is wrong. The knowledge that in some societies a majority of people (or at least of men) may think differently should not weaken our conviction.

It is important to emphasise that, although the moral approach suggested here provides scope for individual moral certainty, such certainty is inevitably limited. We may feel sure about some things (e.g. women's rights) but unsure about others. In some areas we may not have had the time to think things through whilst in others, even after considerable thought, may still feel confused and pulled in different directions. Much of the problem may be uncertainty about consequences and practicalities (e.g. about the extent to which assisted dying would be open to abuse and the feasibility of introducing adequate safeguards). A further point is that, however certain we may feel about something now, we may change our minds in the future. This is has to be the case if we accept that all moral positions are open to challenge and revision in the light of argument, experience, changing circumstances and fresh evidence. The challenge may be internal as much as external. We do not possess fixed 'unitary' personalities and consciousnesses. We can and do engage in internal dialogues whereby we can explore our own competing thoughts

and feelings. Through this process we may come to revise our own moral positions and adapt our future patterns of behaviour accordingly. Acting as a moral agent, it may be concluded, involves identifying behaviours that we can prescribe consistently both for ourselves and others. This requires interaction and dialogue with other people and a questioning/self-questioning approach. An essentially dialectical and creative process is involved that provides scope for both self-development and self-discovery.

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### Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) Extract from Chapter 4: Measuring Pleasure and Pain

"Thus, to take an exact account of an act's general tendency to affect the interests of a community, proceed as follows. Of those whose interests seem to be most immediately affected by the act, take one, and take an account,

- (1) of the value of each pleasure that appears to be produced by it in the first instance;
- (2) of the value of each pain that appears to be produced by it in the first instance;
- (3) of the value of each pleasure that appears to be produced by it after the first, this being the fecundity of the first pleasure and the impurity of the first pain;
- (4) of the value of each pain that appears to be produced by it after the first, this being the fecundity of the first pain and the impurity of the first pleasure. Then
- (5) Sum up the values of all the pleasures on one side and of all the pains on the other. If the balance is on the side of pleasure, that is the over-all good tendency of the act with respect to the interests of that person; if on the side of pain, its over-all bad tendency.
- (6) Repeat the above process with respect to each person whose interests appear to be concerned; and then sum the results. If this balance is on the side of pleasure, that is the over-all good tendency of the act with respect to the interests of the community; if on the side of pain, its over-all bad tendency."



## Bentham's classification of simple pleasures and pains.

Source: *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) Chapter 5

Bentham identifies 14 kinds of pleasure and 12 kinds of pain, as summarised in the table below. Most represent 'opposite sides of the same coin' and can be paired together. Bentham associates the pleasure derived from the application of skill/effort with the *achievement of its intended outcome(s)*, not the application process *itself* which might indeed be *painful* (as recognised by the 'no pain, no gain' dictum). Arguably, however, applying skill/effort can be enjoyable *regardless* of its success. In many areas including competitive sport, 'losers' greatly outnumber 'winners' but simply *trying* can be pleasurable and, indeed, considered an achievement in itself. Not *specifically* included amongst Bentham's pleasures are the experiences of *mental stimulation* provided by, for example, novels, poetry, plays, films, music and other entertainments as well as by our fascination with, and exploration of, the world around us. Without such stimulation we are liable to experience the pain of *boredom* (covered, arguably, by Bentham's 'Deprivation'). A particular source of mental stimulation worth singling out is that of *humour*, which can provide a partial antidote to suffering and generally help to make life more bearable.

Pleasures	Pains
The senses: <i>Pleasant</i> visual, tactile, aural, olfactory and gustatory experiences, sexual pleasure, the satisfaction of hunger/thirst, intoxication, good health.	The senses: <i>Unpleasant</i> visual, tactile, aural, olfactory and gustatory experiences, hunger/thirst, excessive heat/cold, ill-health/disease, physical/mental exhaustion.
Skill: Enjoyment from achieving things that require the application of skill and effort.	Awkwardness: Frustration from not achieving, or finding unduly difficult, things needing skill and effort.
Friendship: Knowing one is <i>liked</i> by particular individuals.	Enmity: Knowing one is <i>disliked</i> by particular individuals.
Good reputation: Knowing one is held in <i>good</i> repute in society.	Bad reputation: Knowing one is held in <i>bad</i> repute in society.
Piety: Believing that one is held in God's <i>good</i> esteem.	Piety: Believing that one is held in God's <i>bad</i> esteem.
Benevolence: Viewing the <i>pleasures</i> of those one <i>likes</i> .	Benevolence: Viewing the <i>pains</i> of those one <i>likes</i> .
Malevolence: Viewing the <i>pains</i> of those one <i>dislikes</i> .	Malevolence: Viewing the <i>pleasures</i> of those one <i>dislikes</i> .
Memory: Remembering <i>pleasant</i> things.	Memory: Remembering <i>painful</i> things.
Imagination: Imagining <i>pleasant</i> things.	Imagination: Imagining <i>painful</i> things.
Expectation: Expecting <i>pleasant</i> things.	Expectation: Expecting <i>painful</i> things.
Association: Pleasure provided by objects/incidents only because they are <i>associated</i> with things in themselves <i>pleasant</i> .	Association: Pain provided by objects/incidents only because they are <i>associated</i> with things in themselves <i>painful</i> .
Power: Knowing that others are obligated to provide one with services/ benefits.	
Wealth: Gaining/possessing things which provide enjoyment/security.	
Relief: Experienced when a pain of some type stops or lessens.	
	Privation: Awareness of being <i>deprived</i> of one or more pleasures, resulting in unsatisfied desire, disappointment or regret.

## A few quotes on the subject of happiness

1. "That action is best, which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers." Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) – *Inquiry Concerning Moral Good and Evil* (1725)
2. "The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation." Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) – *The Commonplace Book* (c. 1776)
3. "The circumstance of utility, in all subjects ... is constantly appealed to in all moral decisions concerning the merit and demerit of actions." David Hume (1711-76) – *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1748)
4. "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..." Jeremy Bentham – *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789)
5. "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) – *Utilitarianism* (1863)
6. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." – *The American Declaration of Independence* (1776)
7. "The object of government in peace and in war is not the glory of rulers or of races, but the happiness of the common man." William Beveridge (1879-1963) – *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (1942)
8. "Mankind does not strive for happiness; only the Englishman does that." Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) – *Twilight of the Idols* (1889)
9. "There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn." Samuel Johnson (1709-84) – recorded in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791)

## Some possible questions for discussion:

- The sixth commandment in the Bible (Exodus 20:13) has been translated as both "You shall not kill" and "You shall not commit murder". If the former is the *correct* representation of God's wishes, does this mean that we are morally bound to be *pacifists* i.e. not to kill under *any* circumstances?
- Are some things just good or bad, in themselves, never mind their consequences for human happiness or for anything else?
- To be moral, do our choices have to be *consistent*? Why not just 'wing' them on the basis of gut feeling?
- We might not be able to perform a 'happiness calculation' for every choice we make but can we identify *rules of conduct* which we can be confident will generally produce the happiest results?
- If the consequences of actions are not judged on the basis of their impact on human happiness or the meeting of human preferences, on what other basis might they be judged?
- Which is more important, to maximise happiness or minimise unhappiness?
- If we could be made blissfully happy (without impairing our health or physical/mental functioning) by regularly taking some drug, would we be 'happy' to do so?
- Do we agree that "Where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise."
- Is it more important to live truthfully and honestly than to be happy?
- Is the happiness we get from the drinks we buy today likely to be greater or less than the happiness that would result if we donated the money instead to Oxfam or some other good cause?