
Albert Camus

(*Before reading the following lecture, you should watch the RealPlayer presentation for Module Seven, entitled "Modern Theories of the Good"*)

More Recent Views on Ultimate Good

In the audio/slide show for this module, I spent most of our time discussing the details of a very influential ethical theory that we encounter in this chapter for the first time: utilitarianism. In the readings, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, defend this theory as justified by the idea that happiness is the only thing that we find **intrinsically** good. The Enlightenment *philosophè* Voltaire tells an intriguing story that may or may not support their views, while the American psychologist and philosopher William James modifies their idea somewhat. We'll also examine and try to understand the most important criticisms of happiness-based theories.

I: Bentham and Mill: pleasures, high and low
A. BACKGROUND

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was the founder of the English school of moral thinking called utilitarianism, which took the ancient dictum of hedonism (the idea that pleasure is the ultimate good) from Epicurus and married it with Hume's idea that the point of morality is to serve the public good over and above individual interests. Bentham's most famous work, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) attempted to make the (for the time) radical case that the happiness of the old feudal aristocracy did not automatically outweigh the happiness of the larger middle and lower classes of England, and used this principle to argue for progressive social reforms in voting and education.

Bentham's godson, **John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873), was also committed to social reform and a devoted liberal. His famous essay *On Liberty* (1859) laid out a justification for understanding freedom of speech as establishing a "free marketplace of ideas" that ought not to be regulated except in the most dire cases by the "tyranny of the majority." Mill's book *Utilitarianism* (1860)) is the most prominent and well-read example of the moral philosophy of the same name. We will encounter Bentham and Mill once again in the final module.

B. THE ARGUMENTS

1. Bentham begins by dividing the "arts and sciences" (think: ways in which we spend our leisure time) into those "of amusement" and "of curiosity." The former correspond to the fine arts (music, poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, ornamental gardening, etc.), the latter to hobbies (Bentham mentions heraldry and

the study of antiquities, but we might add leisure sports like golf and fishing, coin collecting, etc.). What's more important, though, is what Bentham says about the *relative worth* of these "arts and sciences." Some people tend to have a prejudice in favor of the fine arts as being the "true culture" of a civilization (in America, we invert that with our adoration of movie stars and NASCAR drivers). Bentham's point is simple: "The utility of all these arts and sciences…the value which they possess, is exactly in proportion to the pleasure they yield…. Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin [a pub game] is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry" (p. 200). Bentham seems to believe that, when weighing our options for how to spend our time, we ought to take into account the *quantity* of pleasure that a pursuit offers us. He does not make an allowance for the difference in the *quality* of pleasures, which led many critics of Bentham's utilitarianism to describe it as a "philosophy fit only for pigs." Based on this reading, the criticism seems to be apt: if we had a way of having experiences of simple "push-pin"/NASCAR/couch potato pleasures all day, every day (perhaps by plugging into an "experience machine" like the one described in the Nozick reading below) then we should take that option over other pleasures which, while "higher," also bring with them distress and pain (imagine the troubled artist who simply *cannot* make the clay reflect what she envisions).

2. Bentham also says some interesting things about poetry (p. 200).

3. John Stuart Mill is the best-known exponent of the utilitarian moral philosophy, and this passage excerpts the first five pages or so of his famous book *Utilitarianism*. The first paragraph lays out the "utility principle": "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (p. 201) Mill defines "happiness" as pleasure and the absence of pain, "unhappiness" as pain and the absence of pleasure (Note how different this definition of happiness is from Aristotle's in the last module). The utility principle, Mill notes later, applies to our *situation in relation with others*, not merely to ourselves (we need to take others' happiness into account as well when looking at the consequences of our actions; see p. 204, bottom). But at the beginning of the piece, Mill also gives us a very concise idea of what a hedonist thinks is ultimately good: "…pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian [philosophy] as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain" (p. 201).
4. Mill then proceeds to defend utilitarianism from the charge that it is a "philosophy for pigs" ("a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened"). To do this, he has to modify Bentham in an important way: he has to say that *quantity* is not the only thing that matters to our appreciation of pleasures, but also that Bentham's distinction between "arts of amusement" (fine arts) and "arts of curiousity" (hobbies) also roughly corresponds to a distinction in *kinds* or *qualities* of pleasures. Are there genuinely "higher" and "lower" pleasures that differ from each other in an ethically relevant way? Mill thinks so, saying, "Human beings

have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification" (p. 201). Since we're capable of feats of the intellect and imagination and possess feelings and moral sentiments that pigs don't, we're also capable of pleasures far beyond rolling mud and eating from a trough. If there is something ethically important about these "higher faculties" (as Mill calls them), then there might be a good reason for utilitarians to endorse our pursuit of higher pleasures *over* lower pleasures.

5. And this is exactly what Mill maintains. He proposes a test for distinguishing between these two different kinds of pleasures, a test based on the wisdom of those who have experienced *both* of two different pleasures being compared: "Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the most desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, *we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account*" (p. 202, italics added). Higher pleasures can be distinguished from lower, and these are better for us in the long run, Mill says, being less costly, safer, and more likely to be worth the investment in time. It is true that higher pleasures sometimes bring certain pains (remember the dissatisfied sculptor, or think of someone who reads the news everyday and prides himself on knowing what's going on in the world, although much of the news is depressing). That's why Mill says, famously, "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 because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides" (p. 203). And while is it empirically the case that some people who have known both higher and lower pleasures choose the latter, Mill thinks this is not so much their free choice as a lack of education or opportunity, or the conditions of a society which stifles the delights of the higher pleasures (if you don't understand what Mill is talking about here, just take a look at your local prime-time TV selections!)

II. James: what morality demands of us
A. BACKGROUND

The father of experimental psychology and an philosopher in the American pragmatist tradition, **William James** (1842-1910) unveiled most of his ideas in packed public lectures around the United States. His *Pragmatism* lectures are as widely read today for their stinging attacks on traditional ways of doing philosophy as for the novel philosophy of belief and action that James adapted from the thought of Charles S. Peirce. He is also the author of *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. William James, who's known for his clever analogies and interesting turns of phrase, treats us to a unusual set of thought experiments, the goal of which is to get to the heart of morality and find out where "good" comes from. You'll notice when you read the next selection from G.E. Moore the same sort of thought experiment being used. First, James asks us to "imagine an absolutely material world, containing only physical and chemical facts, and existing from eternity without a God" (p. 205)—this sounds very much like the Earth before the development of life from a protein-based slurry hundreds of millions of years ago. But it could equally describe a world full of trees, oceans and fairly complex life-forms (up to, but not including the apes and certain other mammals like dolphins and whales). It does not make much sense, to James, to say that any given "snapshot" of this world is any worse or any better than any other, before or after. "Betterness is not a physical relation," he says (p. 205), and "Goodness, badness, and obligation must be *realized* somewhere in order really to exist; and the first step in ethical philosophy is to see that no merely inorganic 'nature of things' can realize them." (pp. 205-206) James says that morality originates in the consciousness of **sentient**, self-aware creatures and that when "goodness" or "badness" so arises, we act in certain ways, putting values on things that they do not have in themselves. Do you agree? James's conclusion here has implications for the next reading from G.E. Moore, but also for some of the things we said about evolutionary ethics in Module Four and some of the things we will say about natural law and natural rights ethics in the next module, too.
2. James also seems to think that ethics has a social dimension. His next thought experiment gives us a nice tour of familiar positions in ethics: he gets us to imagine that in this world of purely physical facts, one person appears. Then there are two persons, and finally a number of persons. Here's a brief synopsis of how James sees the world change morally with the inclusion of these new elements:

# of persons	Ethical situation (according to James)	What this implies
one	"moral solitude"	the "god-like" person who lives alone in this universe may think about goodness and badness, right and wrong, but no obligations exist and there is no standard of right and wrong save his/her subjective views (p. 206)
two	"moral dualism"/egoism of each against each other	the two thinkers have their own standards of good & bad, but may be completely indifferent to each others' standards—there's no compelling reason to come to some kind of consensus (pp. 206-207)
more than two	obligations according to rules derived from "the way the world really is"	"philosopher-types," dissatisfied with the opposition of moral dualism, strive for some fact about the nature of the

		universe in itself that will make one opinion stand out over the other

Notice that only in the third situation do we get anything like what we have been describing as morality. James says, "The philosopher, therefore, who seeks to know which ideal ought to have supreme weight and which one ought to be subordinated, must trace the *ought* itself to the *de facto* constitution of some existing consciousness, behind which, as one of the data of the universe, he as a purely ethical philosopher is unable to go" (p. 207). BUT remember, James already said that the "natural" or physical world outside of particular humans with their minds, desires, and demands on each other doesn't admit of being good or bad: "betterness is not a physical relation." The traditional ethical philosopher's move is not "legal."

3. What does this leave us with? According to James, it leaves us where we were in the situation of "moral dualism"—with competing demands and ethical preferences. So, for example, you can't be both an Epicurean and a Stoic, and if we all followed the path of *ahimsa* with Gandhi, we wouldn't be virtuous in Aristotle's sense, etc., etc. Multiply this competition a thousand-fold (maybe more!) to represent all the desires, aversions (in a word, preferences) that assail us on a daily basis, and you have the basic ethical situation: lots of needs, many demands, not all of which can be reconciled but all of which cry out that they are the most important!
4. This is where James makes his positive claims about ultimate good and the nature of morality. Ready for a shocker? *Each and all of these preferences we have is ultimately good!* "Take any demand, however slight, which any creature, however weak, may make," James writes. "Ought it not, for its own sole sake, to be satisfied? if not, prove why not. The only possible kind of proof you could adduce would be the exhibition of another creature who should make a demand that ran the other way" (p. 208). Competition, lack of time and scarce resources are the main reason why *all* preferences can't be satisfied, James says—otherwise, we would live in a perfect world in which (you guessed it!) *every* preference would be equally satisfied! (James describes such a world at the top of p. 210) This is *preference utilitarianism*—the idea that "since everything which is demanded is by that fact a good, must not the guiding principle for ethical philosophy (since all demands conjointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world) be simply to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can?* That act is the best act, accordingly, which makes for the *best whole*, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions. …[T]herefore, those ideals must be written highest which *prevail at the least cost*, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed" (p. 210).

III. Moore: good, un-analyzable good
A. BACKGROUND

G.E. Moore (1873-1958) was professor of philosophy at Cambridge University and a member of the literary group the Bloomsbury circle. Moore is one of the central figures in the early history of **analytic philosophy**, which pays very close attention to logical

structure in understanding terms, definitions, and arguments. Moore is famous for having defended a version of Hume's naturalistic fallacy (see Module 5) in his book *Principia Ethica*.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. In this part of Moore's *Principia Ethica*, he engages with utilitarian **Henry Sidgwick** (who we met back in Module 5) over the question of whether certain things are good in themselves, or whether they are only good when they serve human interests, desires and needs. Moore puts it this way: "'No one, says Prof. Sidgwick, 'would consider it rational to aim at the production of beauty in external nature, apart from any possible contemplation of it by human beings.' Well, I may say at once that I, for one, do consider this rational; and let us see if I cannot get any one to agree with me" (p. 217). Moore then proposes a thought experiment: imagine two worlds in which humans do not, cannot, and have not ever lived. One is as beautiful as possible; the other is "simply one heap of filth." Moore thinks that it's not at all irrational to prefer that the beautiful world exist rather than the one that is ugly. Do you agree? Think about it: if there is some reason to prefer the beautiful world over the ugly one, even though neither serves any human interest or need, then there is something *intrinsically better* about the beautiful world than the ugly one; by extension, it makes sense to say that beauty has some *intrinsic goodness* to it apart from whether we want it or not.
2. On p. 218, Moore not only concludes from this examination that, in pursuing other goods, we also seem to have a duty to make the world (and perhaps our own lives?) more beautiful. Beauty, as the thought experiment shows, is among the things (like friendship, he mentions) "worth having *purely for their own sakes*." He also *agrees* Sidgwick that the human *consciousness* of beauty is important and valuable; so much so that he calls this "the ultimate and fundamental truth of Moral Philosophy." This reduction of the ethical to the **aesthetic** (concerned with art and beauty) is controversial but thought-provoking—if everyone always did their duty, would the world be a more beautiful place? Our next two authors disagree.

IV. Huxley and Camus: whither happiness?

A. BACKGROUND

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) was an English novelist, best known for writing *Brave New World*. In this futuristic novel the population is programmed to be happy; but there is at least one person who rejects the principle on which this **utopia** is designed (from Singer, p. 401).

Albert Camus (1913-1960) wrote novels and essays. Born in what was then the French colony of Algeria, he was active [like Jean-Paul Sartre] in the French Resistance to the Nazi occupation. He denied that he was an existentialist, but Sisyphus, as presented in his essay, has often been taken as an existentialist hero, triumphing over the absurdity of

a meaningless existence (from Singer, p. 398). I want to personally thank Camus (or at least a student stand-in) for appearing in my introductory video.

B. THE ARGUMENTS

1. Is the world that Huxley describes in *Brave New World* a utopia or a **dystopia**? Is it the best of all possible worlds because everything negative has been eliminated? Or is it the worst of all possible worlds because everything positive is gone? As the Resident World Controller for Western Europe, Mustapha Mond, claims, a kind of "ultimate good" has been achieved: "The world's stable now. People are happy; they get what they want and they never want what they can't get. They're well off; they're safe; they're never ill; they're not afraid of death; they're blissfully ignorant of passion and old age." Up to this point, this sounds pretty good, but then Mond goes on to say that it was necessary for society to give up certain things to achieve this: "…they're plagued with no mothers or fathers; they've got no wives, or children, or loves to feel strongly about; they're so conditioned that they practically can't help behaving as they ought to behave. And if anything should go wrong, there's *soma*" (p. 222). Does this describe a world where the views of Bentham, Mill, and James have won out?
2. Recall (from I above) Mill's views about higher and lower pleasures. Mond and the Savage quote Shakespeare liberally, but is Mond's world one of higher pleasures? Note what Mond says on p. 222: "You've got to choose between happiness and what people used to call high art. We've sacrificed the high art." Mill thinks that people who have experienced both "happiness" (lower pleasures) and "high art" (higher pleasures) won't sacrifice the latter for any amount of the former. In Mond's world, do you think the "Deltas" (average folk) made this choice, or was it imposed on them? What would Mill think about this?
3. Mond says that the drug *soma* gives us a "holiday from the facts," calms the angry, makes you patient and able to deal with the worst life can throw at you. In a great phrase, he calls it "morality in a bottle." Is immorality just a chemical or psychological imbalance? Have we been looking in the wrong places for the answers to our questions for this whole course so far?

4. Do you remember our brief introduction to existentialist ethics with **Jean-Paul Sartre**? Camus' poetic exploration of the human condition in "The Myth of Sisyphus" is guided by two central points of existentialism: (1) that the "truly serious philosophical problem[s]" are those of *existence*, and whether life is worth the trouble or not, as well as (2) that while humans have purposes, human life as a whole does not have an overriding purpose. How does the "myth of Sisyphus" (a real Greek myth adapted by Camus) illustrate point (2)? Perhaps you can see how rolling the boulder up the hill, then watching it roll back only to have to repeat the work is not a *project* or even a *job* for Sisyphus—it has no end, and doesn't even have any real significance or meaning. It's the ancient Greek equivalent of digging holes only to have someone else fill them up.
5. Sisyphus is not merely an "absurd hero" because of the scorn he showed for the gods (p. 226) but also because of the way he relates to his burden. Camus writes

that when faced by the task of navigating through a life that has no over-arching purpose, a person has the option of saying "no" (suicide) or "yes." In this respect, Sisyphus is a "yes-man." Is he happy, or does this burden cause him extraordinary grief that he simply shoulders because there is no other option (another way of putting this question, "Is Sisyphus more an Epicurean or a Stoic?"). What Camus does not tell us here is that there is a third option, which Sisyphus does *not* take. It is neither a "no" nor a "yes" but a "yes, but…" where a person might shoulder the rock-burden but attribute their struggles to a larger religious or moral purpose that helps make sense of it all. For Camus (as for all atheistic existentialists) the problem with this answer is that it is *inauthentic*—it is living life under false pretenses. It is like the tragic situation of an abused wife who rationalizes her husband's abuse by saying that she deserves it, or that he really does love her in some sense. On some level, she realizes that these are just rationalizations. The "heroic" nature of the absurd hero, for Camus, is that like Sisyphus, he does not rely on the crutch that inauthenticity provides.

V. Nozick: the experience machine
A. BACKGROUND

Robert Nozick (1938-2002) was professor philosophy at Princeton and Harvard. His first major work, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974) uses the idea of natural individual rights to set very narrow limits on state action. Nozick's position in this book is typically identified with the political theory of **libertarianism**, which stresses individual rights at [virtually] any costs and advocates very limited government (what Nozick calls the "ultraminimal state") that does little else than protect the rights of its citizens.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. Nozick describes a "virtual reality" experience machine (kind of like "the Matrix," from the films of the same name, but voluntary) that "would give you any experience you desired" (p. 228). You can "jack in" when you please and disconnect after your "experience" is over. Later in the selection, Nozick even says that the potential shortcomings of the machine could be corrected for so that what you experience is as "real" as it can be. Nozick's question is, "Should we 'plug into' this machine?" Many of us who already enjoy movies on plasma-screen TV sets with surround sound or play video games might say, "Sure!" But why not plug into the experience machine for the rest of our lives? Surely the virtual experiences there will be better for most of us who don't live the lives of adventurer-billionaires like Richard Branson!
2. Nozick warns us that we wouldn't want to plug into the experience machine for our whole lives; some might have justified reservations about doing it *at all*. His rhetorical question here is, "*What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside*?" (228) Here Nozick seems to be equating pleasure and happiness (Bentham and Mill), satisfaction of preferences (James), and indeed all "truly personal experiences" (as those private experiences inside an experience

machine would be) with "*how our lives feel from the inside*." Well, what else *is there*, according to Nozick (he cites three things on pp. 228-229; see if you can find all three).

3. Re-read the last five lines of this excerpt. What's Nozick's larger point here about the nature of happiness. Is the experience of "being happy" enough for us? What do you think?

C. Module 7 Writing Assignment (10 points)

1. What do you think is Huxley's deeper point about searching for good in the modern world? What is Camus' deeper point? Which of them do you agree with more? Why?

2. You've probably seen a sci-fi movie that questions the nature of reality like *The Matrix, BladeRunner, Total Recall* or *Vanilla Sky*. Robert Nozick's "Experience Machine" story seems to make the argument what is *good* is not having experiences of a particular type (like experiences of happiness or satisfaction), but actually *living out the experiences themselves*. He seems to believe that there is something good about life, about living, that cannot be *simulated*. But what could this be?