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Moral Theory in the Western Tradition and Its Application within Modern Democratic Societies

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Abstract

There are three main moral theories: virtue ethics, the deontological approach and utilitarianism. The concern here is how they interrelate, why they come into focus at different times and places, and how they are configured in their application to a modern democratic society. Person-oriented virtue ethics was the dominant understanding in Ancient Greece but within the Western tradition this was later subordinated to the monotheism of Ancient Judaism as modified by Christianity. Of growing importance by the eighteenth century was rights theory which was often still situated religiously. Kant's principle of the categorical imperative has been highly influential but was challenged by the emerging nature of industrial and capitalist society. Utilitarianism, within which the moral rightness of activity resides in its tendency to promote happiness or unhappiness, represented the decisive move from the transcendental to the immanent approach. Although all three approaches to moral theory continue to be relevant to identifiable situations and aspects of modern society, there has been a substantial turn towards a heavily modified utilitarianism associated with parliamentary democracy and market economies founded on property ownership. The root cause of this is the ability of utilitarianism, as opposed to the other approaches, to handle considerations of number and probability. The concept of utility is fundamental in economics but the idea has evolved away from its origins to mean "preference". There is a sense in which the straightforward appeal of basic utilitarianism has been "leased out" in modified form to a set of institutional arrangements. Certain "pressure points" in a modern society are noted which pose particular problems pertinent to moral theory. Bernard Williams argues persuasively for an appropriately modified form of virtue ethics.

Keywords

Virtue Ethics, Deontological Approach, Utilitarianism, Rights Theory, Kant's Categorical Imperative, Transcendental and Immanent Approaches, Utility as Preference, Bernard Williams

1. Introduction

Ethics and morality are concerned with the nature of human beings, the qualities they exhibit, their behaviour and interactions, and, more generally, the ways they inter-affect one another. Of great importance is the ethical or moral environment, the climate of ideas guiding us as to how to live; it also provides us with our standards. So too do we gain a conception, as we relate to others, of what is due to us and from us. The meanings of the two concepts of ethics and morality overlap and both concern the difference between "good and bad" and "right and wrong", but the first is sometimes used to refer to the standards of a community or those in a particular social setting, while the second is taken as being personal and normative. "An ethical climate is quite different from a moralistic one." (Blackburn, 2003: p. 3) A central focus is on social control. It may be judged, for instance, that the moral regulation of behaviour makes a fundamental contribution to the solution of the Hobbesian problem, basic to the human situation but experienced particularly in larger populations, of preventing a "war of all against all". Morality, together with social mores, softens interaction and makes behaviour more predictable in helpful ways, notably by promoting truth-telling and promise-keeping. The moral framework assists individual and group goal achievement within a predominant context of orderly and co-operative social and cultural arrangements and practices. These observations help to integrate an account of the nature and role of morality across the generality of human societies and situations.

This article is, however, very much concerned not simply with ethics and morality directly, but with the second-order phenomenon of moral theory, which is the understandings and interpretations which major thinkers and philosophers have developed and presented in respect of these phenomena. Despite the apparent generality of moral concerns and issues, perusal of the literature makes clear that the foci and orientations of these second-order accounts have been various, depending particularly on the date and social location of their articulation. The number of serious moral theories which have been developed is variously presented as being between three and nine, but it is fair to say that there are three major approaches to normative ethics, which together define the area and, in effect, enable one to "triangulate" on the main contours of other formulations. Given the underlying continuities of basic subject matter, however, the important issue which arises is just why the various approaches come to be presented at different times and places; also requiring clarification is how they relate and interconnect with one another.

These concerns come particularly centre-stage in respect of the second main focus of this article which is the approach to, and realisation of, modern democratic society. In this connection, there are those who consider that European societies have undergone a civilising process over the centuries; the changes thus referred to are multi-stranded and multi-institutional and would certainly include politics, society and manners. The decline in, and ultimately the rejection of, the use of judicial torture and public execution provides a particularly important and striking example. No doubt, in respect of change, there is a need to give attention to the contribution of religion and the significance of the passage from a religious to a more secular type of society. Is it the case, one may ask, that the understandings constituting moral theory purchase on modern society in a fundamentally new way? It may be that, while all three of the main approaches remain relevant, as the society has become more complex, with an elaborated and specialised division of labour, the theories have come to bear differentially on particular aspects or institutional areas. In short, the intention here is to explore the relation between moral theory and the changing and emergent character of modern democratic society.

The first of the major approaches is termed *virtue ethics*, the second the *deontological approach*, and the third is known as *consequentialism.* ('Deontology' derives from the Greek for duty [*deontas*] and for the science or study of [*logos*].) By way of orientation, it may be said the three major theories respectively focus on: the *virtues or moral character* (mainly) of individuals; the *duties or rules* governing human activity; the *consequences* of actions. To be more specific regarding the third approach, consequentialism is a class of moral theories which holds that the consequences of one's conduct are the proper (and perhaps only) basis upon which to judge the rightness or wrongness of that conduct. A likely reaction of someone in contemporary society on first hearing of these theories is to say: surely they may be expected to merge into a single theory; after all, the key concepts may be reckoned to inter-connect? Thus, regarding virtue ethics, surely the moral character of an individual is only revealed through their conformity to social norms and their sensitivity to the consequences of their actions? Again, one would tend to take conformity to duties or rules as the sign of a meritorious individual, while judging that rules only have merit where the consequences of conformity at least in the main are judged desirable. Thirdly, a judgement of consequences may be expected to lead to consideration and evaluation of the actions of those from whom they arise and (where appropriate) to the rules to which those involved were conforming.

A relevant response is to say that the differences between the three theories concern which concept is central and which derivative or secondary: though each theory has its distinctive focus and emphasis, it may well find space to situate key ideas of the others. Yet this still leads on to the question as to why in particular circumstances one major concept is taken as basic and how it comes about that, with the passage of time, the focus alters. Plainly changes in the basic values of

societies are potentially relevant as are modifications in its perceived sources of legitimation. That is indeed a central concern here as one proceeds to clarify the changing topography of moral theory in the approach to and achievement of modern society.

This study thus combines the forms of a review and a critique of moral theory; in doing so it draws together historical, sociological and philosophical materials, sometimes in ways neglected in the broader field of study. The focus is the relation between Western society and moral theory through time, culminating in the configuration realised in modern conditions. All three approaches in moral theory remain relevant, but it is argued below that there has been a modern 'turn towards' consequentialism particularly evident in the role of government and the functioning of the capitalist economy. Also, as part of a changing societal agenda, moral theory must be constantly reshaped to bear upon contemporary issues more appropriately and effectively. The nature of, and context for, each of the three main theories is next considered.

2. Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is person rather than action oriented, the focal idea being virtue or moral excellence. Attention is directed towards the moral character of the person, rather than conformity to rules and duties, or the consequences of particular actions (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018). Guidance is provided by saying "act as a virtuous person would act" or by pointing up the qualities of a virtuous person or the behaviour they would exhibit. The approach tends to be totalising in the sense that it concerns the whole of a person's life, rather than merely episodes or particular actions. It seeks to provide answers to such questions as "how should I live?" or "what is the good life? " (Athanassoulis, 2021). A virtuous person is kind throughout their life, because that expresses their nature, and not simply to do their duty or to maximise utility. An underlying thought may be that to build a good society you need to help its citizens to become good people.

Things become somewhat more problematical but more interesting when the attempt is made to list the virtues and it is notable that there are differences between ancient and modern outlooks. Traditionally, cardinal virtues have included prudence, justice, bravery and temperance, to which may be added the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Confucianism lists in descending order of importance, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity, Correlatively, there are corresponding traditional lists of vices including anger, arrogance, envy, gluttony, greed, lust and sloth. Some items have a very old-fashioned ring and it becomes apparent that while there are universal-seeming elements, others arise from the character of a particular type of society. In respect of philosophical analysis it must be noted these virtues and vices are termed *thick concepts*: they have a fair degree of descriptive content while also being evaluatively loaded.

As expected there are differences between the foci of traditional and modern

versions of virtue ethics. The traditional emphasis associated virtue with human flourishing, which was essentially concerned with functioning well in one's social position. This is hardly suggestive of a rapidly changing society. Contemporary agent-based theories more often relate virtue to commonsense intuitions particularly those concerning qualities we see as admirable in other people. It can hardly escape attention also that the traditional emphasis has something of an inbuilt bias towards manly virtues. Against this tendency, some modern writers, including feminists, foreground the ethics of care, particularly such desirable qualities as caring and nurturing. It becomes apparent that there is no overall agreement on what the virtues are, which might be considered as a weakness of virtue ethics. The various lists of virtues do, however, correlate with each other and possess recurrent elements, which is rather suggestive of the idea that there are some issues faced by all people everywhere but others specific to a particular social setting (Nowell-Smith, 1954: pp. 248-251).

The Ancient Greeks

Given its importance as a "seed bed" of key ideas and its "agenda-setting" role for later European societies it is valuable to scrutinise the Ancient Greek contribution. Key notions of Ancient Greek philosophy are virtue (*aretê*) (and the virtues), happiness (*eudaimonia*) and the soul. Significantly, the term *aretê* takes in both virtue and excellence and the quality may be attributed to a knife or a horse; hence the word has connotations of function. Human excellence may be exemplified by the Homeric warrior chieftain or a prominent Athenian statesman, which again points to the significance of performance in a role. Human excellence often took in such moral virtues as courage, moderation, justice and piety, but it could also refer to someone who was good at benefiting their friends and harming enemies, by being cruel and rapacious, hence it does not always sit well with our own concept of moral virtue. Evidently, the conception of virtue is to be situated against wider social practices (MacIntyre, 1985).

The idea of *eudaimonia* incorporates happiness together with living well and doing well; various ideas interconnect here. When engaged in pleasurable activities one can act appropriately or inappropriately, for example act with dignity or act dishonourably. Living well consists of acting honourably for extended periods or even a lifetime. More generally, human excellence as happiness is a basis for carrying out the activities of human life well. The connection to moral virtue may be seen from the example of the possession of courage disposing one to react to fear in an appropriate way. Courage might be expressed in the furtherance of one's own welfare or it might be other-regarding in being concerned with one's city's welfare. Acting in these kinds of ways could clearly make one feel happy but that is not the primary idea. Rather the essential link would be expressed by this assertion: "I was happy with the way things were developing; my work was going well"; happiness thus implies praiseworthy accomplishment.

Also involved in Ancient Greek thought is the idea that virtue is a good of the soul. As one would expect, the thrust of this is that being moral does not so much

provide beauty, health or prosperity, but as something good, it belongs to the soul. As is well-known, Plato holds that the soul is immortal and therefore virtue may transcend death, but that is not a necessary element. Where one lives a mortal life which is good in this sense, that is in itself happiness; yet the value of virtue does not reside in its being a means to achieving happiness. A further concept to situate is *eusebia* which is probably most often translated as "piety" but the meaning is broader than that incorporating one's duty to oneself, others and the gods, for it concerns sustaining the social order while also affirming one's own place within it.

It is significant that Aristotle emphasized that it takes education and practice in order to become virtuous, He also effectively equated the 'intended' life for a human with the virtuous life and also argued that this was life lived according to reason. It is worth pointing up that this is an early example of a major tradition in moral philosophy concerning itself with the positive concepts of happiness or *eudaimonia*, thus providing a vision of what life would look like at its best. While for Aristotle, for instance, the admirable life is one of eudaimonia, as noted above, something more than "happiness", for Jeremy Bentham at the turn of the 19th century, considered below, the objective is pleasure and avoidance of pain and he even went on to develop the idea of a felicitous calculus influential in economics. The target populations differed greatly, of course: Aristotle's thoughts centred on the male aristocracy of a slave-owning society, while Bentham had wider humanity in mind.

Ancient Judaism and the Coming of Christianity

One can perhaps risk the generalisation that whereas the Ancient Greeks particularly shaped Western philosophical thought and helped sustain virtue ethics, Ancient Judaism supplied the monotheistic religious tradition; these two elements were integrated in the context of European and North African Christianity (Newman, 2003). Monotheism provided the basic source of legitimation, by which one means the justification of the social order in the deepest sense. In that tradition, where a punishing or rewarding God is the legitimating source, the verticality of the relationship with humans makes virtue ethics salient, in the sense of giving expression to God's will. Leadership is patriarchal both in society and within the family. Indeed the Jewish tradition lays great stress on reverence for parents, and reverence for old age, with the father viewed as the head of the family, while the mother is entitled to the honour and respect of children; but the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac sets the tone with God's will taking priority even over parental love and duty.

Flowing from the biblical prophets is exhortation for all people to lead a righteous life. Favoured qualities are benevolence, faith, kindness for the needy and compassion for the suffering; one is also required to have a truly humble and contrite spirit (Telushkin, 2000). The tradition is less martial than the Greek for a peace-loving disposition is generally favoured, although Samuel and Moses are heard to urge killing. There is little doubt, however, that some of the detailed

precepts in the Old Testament are troubling, for instance, God seems to have no problem with a slave-owning society (Blackburn, 2003: p. 10). Within classical rabbinic ethics three fundamental values are justice, truth and peace. It is affirmed that justice is God's and must be vindicated, whether things of great or small value are at stake. Also forbidden are falsehood, flattery, perjury and false swearing. The reputation of one's fellow man is sacred. It seems there is more emphasis on internalised states than in the Ancient Greek tradition, for hatred of one's brother in one's heart is condemned as is a relentless, revengeful disposition.

Yet a central idea within the tradition is that of a commandment; which makes what should be done rather subject to an order or instruction. The twelve commandments constitute a foundational statement regarding moral behaviour. As is well known the New Testament message of good news and emphasis on love, tends to displace the idea of a vengeful God, but there is still great stress on what "thou shalt" or "shalt not do", or "wilt do", thus to a degree retaining an imperative context. Where moral teaching is via parables, as exemplified by that of the Good Samaritan, it serves to enlarge the conception of virtue. What seems to be happening is that a monotheistic tradition where virtue centrally consists in giving expression to God's will softens slightly towards provision of guidance as to what we ought to do. Hence the tradition combines a foundation of virtue ethics with elements of a somewhat narrower imperatively coordinated morality. The central concern in the Christian tradition is the state of one's soul. While love and forgiveness may be admirable, it is difficult to ignore the point that the New Testament is based on the morally dubious idea that justice can be served by the sacrifice of an innocent for the sins of the guilty (Blackburn, 2003: p. 11).

In the passage from Ancient Judaism to Christianity a change comes about of considerable moral significance. As is well known St Paul extended the Christian mission to include not simply Jews but also gentiles, thus widening its scope from an ethnic group to potentially the whole of humanity. Given that it became a world religion, its principles and precepts were increasingly felt to apply to everyone. Also significant is the fact that Christianity arose among subordinated people in the Roman Empire and initially it did not challenge the political status quo (Startup, 2020: section 10). Hence it developed an appeal towards disadvantaged people and also increasingly towards women. Of course, it became the religion of the empire in the fourth century CE. Thus for various reasons, the religion had a powerful in-built tendency to travel with and reinforce the universalizing character of morality and conceptions of virtue.

3. The Deontological Approach

By contrast with virtue theories concerned with what kind of person we are and should be, the moral theories of deontologists aim to guide and assess our choices of what we ought to do. There is also a sharp contrast with the approach of consequentialists considered below, in respect of the criteria used in judgment. Whereas deontologists have developed criteria to judge the morality of choices,

consequentialists have done so in judging the states of affairs choices bring about. Indeed some versions of a deontological approach specifically maintain that some choices cannot be justified by their effects *i.e.* the choice is morally forbidden no matter how morally good its consequences. For such deontologists, "what makes a choice right is its conformity with a moral norm" and also for these "the Right is said to have priority over the Good" (Alexander & Moore, 2012: section 2). It might be said, for instance, that it is wrong to neglect one's children despite the fact that it might lead to great financial saving.

Attention is drawn here to two prominent duty theories (Fieser, 2021: section 2b). The first of these approaches is *rights theory*. In the language of the theory, rights and duties are correlative, in that the rights of one person imply the duties of one or more others. An early influential account of this kind was given in the seventeenth century by John Locke, who proclaims natural rights given to us by God: the right to life, liberty and possessions and the obligation on others not to harm or interfere with them. This approach was taken up in the United States Declaration of Independence which recognises the fundamental rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and, derivatively, more specific rights to property, movement, speech and religious expression. Traditionally, moral rights are proclaimed to be: natural *i.e.* not invented by governments; universal in the sense of transcending any specific country; equal in being the same for all people; inalienable in that one cannot hand them over or sell them, especially as in slavery. Particularly when God drops out, however, the notion of *natural* rights becomes somewhat unclear. It is fair to say that the idea of the benevolent deity was beginning to lose ground by the end of the 17th century. This became particularly evident in the French Revolution commencing in 1789.

With the approach to a more secular society, the following point is significant. Particularly among its strong adherents, there are those who stress that Christianity (or another major religion) is a system and see difficulty in people maintaining moral convictions originating from it, once the deity is judged to be non-existent. (Anscombe, 1958; for Nietzsche's view on this point see Tanner, 2000: pp. 38-42.) At least it is felt that, where the original validating authority is abandoned, something else would be required in its place. However, experience suggests this need not be the case: convictions can be internalised by individuals and maintain their normative force without there being acknowledgement of any external authority. To take a specific example: many non-believers fully recognise the power and relevance for action of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Of course, in a more secular society the origins of convictions and notions as to rights and responsibilities could be various.

A second highly influential duty-based theory is provided by Kant, who sought a basis for ethics; Kant judges motives important and points up the strength of a sense of duty (Johnson & Cureton, 2021). Regarding an external god, Kant feels it encourages us to act in accordance with a rule, but only because of fear of punishment or some other incentive. What is really required is for people to act out of

respect for a rule: that is true virtue; but if there is no god we seem to be faced with rules of our own making. He is well-known for his presentation of a foundational principle of duty (Fieser, 2021: section 2b). Kant agrees that we have a whole number of specific duties to ourselves and others, such as developing one's talents and keeping promises, but judges that these are encompassed by a more foundational principle, the "categorical imperative" (Rohlf, 2023: section 5.4). This requires an action irrespective of the context of personal desires. One of at least four formulations which he presents is: "Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (known as the Formula of Universal Law). One may note, for instance, that our ability to give and receive promises depends upon general compliance with the principle of keeping promises. That much seems clear, but there are problems when total compliance is required; for instance, the rule against lying must be reasonable to allow for white lies and other exceptions. Nevertheless, it is indeed arguably fundamental that everybody's moral deliberations must incorporate the requirement, "that what I regard as right for myself I must be able to regard as right for everybody in the same situation, and that what I regard as right for everybody in this situation is right for me" (Körner, 1971: p. 136).

A further formulation, perhaps the most influential is: so act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means (the Formula of Humanity). He judges that the various formulae are proved by reason alone. On a specific controversial point, Kant considers suicide wrong on the grounds that one would be treating one's own life as a means to the alleviation of one's misery. On the other hand, the general idea of being sure to respect others is undoubtedly attractive and probably more practicable than aiming to love one other.

It is worth dwelling on just what adherence to the categorical imperative may be taken to involve within the context of a modern, predominantly capitalist economy; the point being that people do function as a means in the context of their employment. For instance, employees are a means towards commercial success and profitability. Suppose there is a need for a plumber to visit one's house; plainly one's primary concern is instrumental in seeking to get the plumbing job done. Now most of us will also resonate with the idea that as a customer one should treat the plumber politely and with respect, perhaps also offer a cup of tea; but the responsibilities towards that person are taken to be distinctly finite. It is additionally apparent that many economic transactions in which we engage are more fleeting than those with the plumber, for instance, when we pay at checkouts. Summing up, while agreeing with the proverbial saying that "manners makyth man", it is hard not to characterise most of the relations constituting a modern economy as predominantly transactional and instrumental in their character. Perhaps one is being required to somehow break out or free oneself from the context of instrumentality and relate to others in a spirit of generosity and fellow feeling: a kind of New Testament "loaves and fishes" response.

4. Consequentialism

As already indicated, this approach implies that the moral rightness or normative significance of an act or activity depends upon its consequences (Craig, 2002: pp. 45-49). The outcome is what is judged fundamentally important, rather than the motive behind it or the existence of a social rule requiring that type of act (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2023). In practice, the label 'consequentialist' tends to be applied to relatives or descendants of classic utilitarianism, a perspective particularly associated with Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Their approach was strongly shaped by their experience of social conditions in nineteenth century Great Britain and they wished to see laws changed and corrupt practices done away with (Bentham, 1789/1907); hence they sought to shape a normative ethical theory which could find employment as a critical tool (Driver, 2014).

Bentham claims that humans are ruled in their behaviour by the 'two sovereign masters' of pleasure and pain, and he feels actions should be approved when they promote pleasure or happiness and disapproved when they tend to cause unhappiness or pain; this is the principle of utility which should be the standard for governments and individuals. It is worth noting that this last sentence contains a factual assertion in its first clause, while the second part expresses a value. A possible response is to say that the factual assertion concerns simply a tendency, while the value, although important, may simply be one among many. Nevertheless most sensitive people would want to give considerable weight to issues concerning happiness and unhappiness. Fairly quickly it was realised that the principle of utility could be taken to apply also to higher animals, but that gives rise to the issue as to whether animal pleasure or pain is to count the same or less than that of humans. Implicitly or explicitly, that remains an increasing concern in the modern era with wild animal habitats being under constant threat.

Mill defines utilitarianism as a theory based on the principle that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." Hence within his view there is a discernible shift of focus from pleasure to happiness (raising the issue as to how they relate). Both writers seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number counting everyone equally (taking positive account of happiness and negative account of unhappiness) but Mill modified Bentham's thesis by admitting and emphasizing the qualitative aspect. He argues, for instance, that pleasures deriving from the exercise of intellectual capacities are to be rated more highly than simple sensual pleasures, and he grounds this on the assertion that those who have experienced both consider the former superior. (It may be, however, that in some instances, such as viewing Shakespeare's *King Lear*, it is the activity which is rated higher rather than the pleasure.) The direction of travel of these writers is easily understood, a point in favour of the approach, but anyone can see that measuring utility is likely to prove challenging. One problem is that happiness is more diffuse and general than the pain of toothache or pleasure of orgasm. A further complicating factor is

feeling in anticipation, feeling at the time and both feeling and evaluation after the event.

Utilitarians make clear that the principle is not intended as a decision procedure or guide *i.e.* a method agents consciously apply, but rather it is a criterion or standard of what is morally right. In actuality, lives are governed by a framework of institutions and rules, especially laws, and there is the added point that the consequences of our actions for others, both direct and indirect, are often hard to assess. Because of this Mill and others developed the position of rule utilitarianism, which is to the effect that maximising utility will require the creation of a moral order containing rules. In this context, that murder is against the law is a good rule because it tends to promote happiness. Mill is sometimes characterised as an act utilitarian in respect of the objective rightness of actions, but a rule utilitarian regarding the theory of moral obligation. Following on from this, it may be judged that the utilitarian standard is a very demanding one, in that it seems we could always do better, but Mill seeks to soften it somewhat by arguing that an act is morally wrong only when both it fails to maximize utility and its agent is liable to punishment for the failure (Mill, 1861/1998). Although a commonsensical-sounding compromise there is difficulty with this position, which implies that it is not always wrong to fail to do what one morally should do.

As noted, Mill's thought develops in the direction of rule utilitarianism. A similar tendency is evident in David Hume's approach. He points up the way in which the framework of laws, including those focused on property, impacts on general happiness; so he is led towards "indirect" utilitarianism. A further point is that we may use the language of deontology, in referring to justice and rights and persons of integrity, but, when things are sufficiently bad, rights that would otherwise have clear application may need to be overridden; for instance, when the security of the state is threatened by war. Hume is also among those making the rather different point that gratitude to those who have done us good, and sympathy with those in pain or trouble, are natural to most of us and are good things.

The indirect form of utilitarianism has an important underlying source of strength. It at least provides a framework or criterion for judging whether particular rights, rules or even virtues of conduct, come to be on the list of rights, rules and virtues. They get there because they tend to serve the common good, in terms of general happiness and well-being. Other approaches within moral theory rather struggle to do this.

It is an essential element that factors causing misery and unhappiness are easier to identify than those causing happiness: basically no-one wants to suffer pain, disease, misery, and failure. As a consequence the impact of utilitarianism on the political order tends to push it towards a liberal concern oriented towards so-called "negative liberty", whereby people are to be free from evils. However, the contribution is greater than it seems because "freedom to" and "freedom from" connect up. One cannot achieve worthwhile positive objectives while in pain or crippled by disease.

In respect of utilitarianism, the basis of action of the individual and the state differs in an important way. It can be seen that individuals are to a substantial degree responsible for their own pleasure and pain, and they also have particular concerns and obligations to specific others, most obviously family and friends. A very difficult issue concerns how much effort to devote to oneself and near ones and dear ones and how much to wider humanity. The state is in an easier position in the sense that, particularly in the case of a democratic state, it can be taken to be equally responsible for all its citizens, rather than being biased by attachment to particular groups and individuals. The corresponding problem at that level, however, is how much should a state simply serve its own citizens as against serving humanity as a whole. Utilitarianism resonates with us today because many post-war welfare state policies, such as the creation of the UK's National Health Service, may be viewed as expressing utilitarian principles. This may also be taken to apply to government policy during the recent pandemic.

5. The Relevance of All Three Approaches to Modern Conditions

1) Below it is argued that in a modern, particularly a democratic, society the topography of moral orientation undergoes substantial change, but at this point the intention is to establish that all three approaches continue to be relevant. In this connection it is pertinent that there has been a substantial enlargement of the division and specialisation of labour giving rise to a multiplicity of roles, but it must be recognised that these vary greatly in respect of the character of role definition. The role of the plumber has already been taken as an example, with its high degree of specificity in its task-orientation. Other roles of importance are much more diffuse in this respect. Indeed, the contrast is particularly great with the character of the role of central societal importance, that of parent (or, where appropriate, guardian).

The requirements of a good parent can be specified in accordance with virtue ethics, without too much strain. For instance, a good parent should be kind, preferably as an expression of their nature, not simply out of duty or to maximise utility; a good parent should also possess the qualities of caring and nurturing. One might also hope they possess wisdom, perhaps particularly in respect of practical aspects. On the other hand, we do not appreciate a parent with the vices of anger, arrogance, greed and sloth. The outlook on parenthood is also totalising in that it concerns the whole of a person's life rather than merely episodes. This has application to the contribution of love: we expect parents both to feel and express love and that it will find expression in myriad ways. Despite this focus on virtues and vices, of course it is the case that one can also talk of the duties of parenthood e.g. to maintain the family in a physical and economic sense, and the need for them to seek to achieve many specific worthwhile outcomes.

To turn to consider the contribution of virtue ethics to a further aspect of socialisation, let us ask the important question: what qualities should we look for in

the head teacher (or principal) of a primary school? Now utilitarianism can contribute because one may say that she should aim to make the school a happy place; but this goes only so far. One would proceed to stress that, as well as disseminating knowledge, the teacher should be inculcating basic values and principles and, very importantly, express those values and principles in her own behaviour. The teacher should be a kind, honest, and socially responsible person and she should so behave that her pupils will grow up with these same qualities. Considerations of virtue enter because the head teacher is central to a formal socialisation process, it is hoped complementing the socialising role of the parent. While recognising that there are both expressive and instrumental aspects to the role of primary school head teacher, we can again usefully understand what is called for from the perspective of virtue ethics.

Significantly too, within the occupational sphere of a modern society some strategically important roles are assigned professional status. This has to do with the fact that sometimes as a client or customer one is looking for the performance of a relatively specific, perhaps limited task, as with the plumber, but sometimes we are in a potentially more vulnerable situation where much more is involved. When we go to the doctor one is looking for that person to use their expertise to set one on the road to good health whatever that involves, and whether or not the course of action is foreseeable by the client in advance; hence the patient is in a position of vulnerability, which means they could be exploited. An aspect of a professional role which acts as a counterweight is that the behaviour of the occupant is understood to be regulated by values but also by their membership of a professional body. In the case of the doctor this is summed up in the notion that they have taken the Hippocratic Oath: I promise my patients competence, integrity, candor, personal commitment to their best interest, compassion, and absolute discretion, and confidentiality within the law. This amounts to what might be termed 'virtue-ethics' within the role.

2) Focusing next on the continuing salience of the deontological approach, one must note that in the twentieth century the number of formally declared rights tended to expand considerably. It seems that a peculiarity of our present ethical climate is that we care much more about our rights than about our 'good'; we are nervous about talking about our good, also about duty. It is worth scrutinising *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of the United Nations in 1948 with its Preamble and 30 Articles (see Blackburn, 2003: Appendix). The mention of rights is everywhere but in the Declaration only Article 29 explicitly mentions duties, although that idea is implicit in other Articles such as 4 and 5 concerned with slavery and torture. Hence the UN list gives rise to a heavy correlative, but largely implicit, set of duties, which tends to be understood (perhaps sometimes by default) as placed on the shoulders of governments. In some cases it is hard to see how a government could discharge the indicated responsibilities. For instance, Article 23 states that: "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against

unemployment." A national government could hardly create these conditions even were it itself to employ everyone; on the other hand, it can reasonably seek to promote an approximation to full employment. At least one is entitled to say that this and other requirements give rise to the phenomenon of the 'overloaded state' or government. Not just this, but it raises the issue of the responsibilities of the world's governments towards those populations living in the planet's relatively lawless or ungoverned spaces. As well as the issue of the inflation in rights, one may reasonably draw attention to the issue of its language: it is apt to be adversarial, pitting a defined group against others; hence it can prove divisive.

To recognise further the continuing importance of the deontological approach, account must be taken of the value of adherence to civilised norms across the full range of social activities. We do not consider the values of kindness, truthfulness and promise-keeping to be limited by time and place, they are permanently relevant and may be expressed in any context. We potentially need help from each other in as yet unidentified ways: for instance, one could have an accident in the street, or urgently need a lift in a car. Yet there is a difficulty with Kant's uncompromising approach: the requirements regarding such aspects as lying and charity must not be taken as unlimited; they must be *reasonable*. On the other hand, Kant's idea of treating others as an end rather than simply a means is perennially relevant. It is highly significant that these norms and values come into play in many situations where we are not being overlooked or subject to formal sanction. While it is not the modern style to emphasise the idea of 'duty', the importance of adherence to these norms not only continues but it could even be enhanced through the application of intelligence by members of a more highly educated population.

3) Thirdly, one may draw attention to the rise of consequentialism through the example of the outlook on same sex relationships. It is significant that the precise issue of how to respond to that type of behaviour arises for the state and society as a whole. At an earlier time, when male same sex behaviour was unlawful, that practice was characterised as "unnatural", "deviant", "sick", "perverted". It was particularly condemned by the actively religious as being a sin, contrary to God's commands; chapter and verse were sometimes quoted to that effect from religious texts. Even in the eighteenth century Bentham himself queried that approach. Significantly too, in living memory in the UK those practicing same sex relationships were not infrequently blackmailed or even attacked. It is striking, however, how rapidly evaluations changed partly given the post-war decline of religion in western Europe. Soon people were acknowledging that this was the way a minority of the population expressed their sexual feelings which posed no threat to others. Though some people claimed it was "nauseating", given that it was conducted in private there was no need for others even to observe it. In the UK male same sex relations were legalised in 1967 and public opinion since then has moved steadily in a supportive way, as shown, for instance, by the findings of the annual publication *British Social Attitudes*. All the evidence is that this more tolerant type of

outlook now predominates in the UK in relation to the wide spectrum of sexual practices.

It is to be noted that utilitarianism, as contrasted with the deontological approach, fits with what may be termed a 'gradualist approach' to an issue, which may have ready application to a topic such as abortion rights. There are those who wish to condemn all abortion and others who would never criticize any instance. Yet consider how varied are the circumstances within which it might be contemplated: abortion could take place a month after conception or a week before an expected normal birth; it could be following the rape of a sixteen-year-old or following the identification of a viable foetus as female. Most reasonable people would agree that these differ in their rights and wrongs. Hence the absolutist types of position get into difficulties, while the compromises involved in the UK's Abortion Act seem to work well in practice.

Enough has been done to demonstrate the continuing relevance of the three perspectives on moral theory. The complexity of modern society is partly matched by the complexity of the way in which their key insights come into play. One may tentatively conclude to which type of concern each approach is particularly well directed. Virtue ethics may have direct application to parental roles and some others particularly concerned with socialisation such as the primary school head teacher. The deontological approach continues to have sharp relevance at the political level in the formal declaration of human rights; but it also has application to civilised norms of the widest possible application, such as the desirability of being truthful or kind. As has been seen the consequentialist, or specifically utilitarian, approach helps one to address social issues and answer such a question as: Should same sex activity be against the law? It may also be judged highly relevant to this topical issue: Should the assisted dying of terminally ill people be allowed? In both cases it is helpful because issues of pleasure on the one hand, and pain and discomfort on the other are central.

6. The Modern Turn towards Consequentialism: Considerations of Number and Probability

There is little doubt that, despite their individual shortcomings, virtue ethics, the deontological approach and utilitarianism are, in their differing ways, illuminating approaches to the moral evaluation of action (Körner, 1971: p. 139). At this point, however, it is vital to step back and survey the changing nature of western societies. The centrally important developments of the last two centuries are parliamentary democracy and market economies founded on property ownership; the context is one of rapid social change. It may be suggested that this pattern of institutional development to an important extent draws attention to some limitations of straightforwardly evaluating individuals and their behaviour by reference to moral theory. The underlying problem is that in a mass society the complexity of the ways in which people, who have a great many potentially differing roles and goals, inter-affect one another is enormous.

At the political level the answer is to weigh every adult equally in relation to the choice of a government which then theoretically acts in the general interest. In the economic sphere the answer is to develop markets within which participants freely enter contractual relations. For our purposes here it is of the essence that neither institutional pattern is considered morally right in an unqualified way. It is acknowledged that democracy is far from perfect but is 'the least bad' option. Again, it is recognised that people often enter market relations with highly unequal power and that markets generate excessive inequalities. Nevertheless, the point to note is that adults are treated as units and it is implicitly hoped, both in the political and economic spheres, that the summation will prove reasonably satisfactory, if far from perfect. On this understanding of the emergent institutional basis, one must reflect on the developing nature of moral theory.

A consequentialist doctrine such as utilitarianism has often been criticised for being too conceptually meagre and powerfully in need of supplementation; certainly considerations of pleasure, pain and happiness, while being extremely important, amount to a limited tool-kit with which to handle (say) issues of rights, justice or the personal making and keeping of promises. One strategic concept that it does possess which must not be overlooked, however, is that of number. Utilitarianism offers a framework for handling the 'numbers game' where there is a need to way up gains and losses including loss of life within a population; for instance, it can handle the well-worn philosophical run-away trolley thought experiment where one person may be sacrificed to save five. Interestingly, the other major contributions to moral theory can find it surprisingly difficult to play the numbers game. In respect of the deontological approach it is affirmed: "The problem of how to account for the significance of numbers without giving up deontology and adopting consequentialism,... is one that a number of deontologists are now working to solve ... Until it is solved, it will remain a huge thorn in the deontologist's side." (Alexander & Moore, 2021: section 2.2) Again it is argued:

"[T]here are situations—unfortunately not all of them thought experiments—where compliance with deontological norms will bring about disastrous consequences. To take a stock example of much current discussion, suppose that unless *A* violates the deontological duty not to torture an innocent person (*B*), ten, or a thousand, or a million other innocent people will die because of a hidden nuclear device. If *A* is forbidden by deontological morality from torturing *B*, many would regard that as a *reductio ad absurdum* of deontology" (Alexander & Moore, 2021: section 4).

So too it may be judged that virtue ethics struggles to handle issues of number without tending to break out of the confines of its own framework. Analysis of the virtues and vices of agents is perhaps somewhat too far removed from the significance of the numbers of people experiencing consequences.

Besides being able to handle considerations of number, a further-related-area in which consequentialism, and in particular utilitarianism, may have greater potential than the other two main approaches is where probabilities are an essential

feature of the situation, including particularly where there is uncertainty about outcomes. In this connection it is essential to note that the topics of probability and statistics have developed to become central in social and political life only during the last two centuries. In a further philosophical thought experiment it is asked for instance whether one "should detonate dynamite in a mining operation if there is a chance that the explosion will cause the Fat Man to tumble into the path of the trolley that would otherwise kill five" (Alexander & Moore, 2021: section 4). For those, surely few (and I am not one of them!), tempted to proceed with the detonation, the estimate of the magnitude of the probability is crucial. The wider point here is that the use of probability (and statistics) is a straightforward extension of the consequentialist's ability to deal with considerations of number; but it does not lend itself to ready treatment by the virtue ethicist or deontologist.

It may be readily seen, for instance, that government action based on utilitarian considerations is very likely to involve probabilistic or statistical elements. In the retreat to Dunkirk in the war, the decision to use small groups of troops at great personal risk to delay the German advance in order to save tens of thousands is a case in point. A pertinent contemporary example concerns organ transplant: an organ which has become available is used in a young person rather than an old one, on the grounds that the younger will have more quality years ahead of him or her; but, of course, the argument is probabilistic and statistical. The policies which countries pursued in distributing vaccines against covid-19 in their populations were grounded in a similar way. Without formally adopting a utilitarian approach, democratic governments find those sorts of considerations permeate into their policy-making; after all, in a democracy numbers count! Importantly too, as the discipline of economics developed through the twentieth century, a transmuted idea of utility played a central role with analysis increasingly incorporating probability and statistics.

Utilitarianism and Economics

The concept of utility is fundamental in economics, but the idea has evolved away from its origins. Whereas Bentham was concerned with a balance of pleasure and pain, later "utility came to mean desiredness" (Little, 2002: p. 3). This is not the same because what people desire, or more specifically offer money for, is by no means always what will make them happy. Later still, "desiredness" lost its psychological reference and was replaced by the idea of "preference", which is concerned with a pattern of choice: where someone always chooses one type of item rather than another, this is taken to indicate a preference for the first type; so utility came to represent preference.

More technical economic concepts are built up on this basis. From the structure of a person's economic choices is built up a utility function and one can speak about maximising utility. A key step is then to progress from focusing on certainties to being able to handle the many economic choices which involve uncertainty. What is called an expected utility function is the sum of the utilities of various outcomes each multiplied by the probability of its occurrence. Plainly there is then

the need to progress from individuals to populations and collectivities. Handling populations makes use of the result that, "general betterness can be represented by an expectational utility function that is the sum of expectational utility functions representing the betterness relations of individuals" (Little, 2002: p. 15). Welfare economics concerns that part of economics which relates to the well-being or welfare of defined populations of varying size. Within this field one can distinguish theoretical and applied welfare economics, the latter concerning what ought to be done in terms of economic policy. Cost benefit analysis is a useful tool enabling one to determine which of two states of affairs is better or worse than the other.

This abbreviated consideration of the relation between utilitarianism and economics may well give rise to the question: As populations grow richer do they become happier? Plainly measuring happiness is difficult and in practice assessment may be made by getting people to indicate subjective preferences through their ticking boxes on one or more ordinal scales. Even though the methods used are evidently crude, one can safely conclude that there is not a direct straightforward relationship between growing wealth and happiness. One reason for this is that happiness and misery are bound up with some absolutes but also some relativities. There can be some upward social mobility but that does not alter the fact that at any time there are both those at the bottom as well as those at the top of the social scale. Somebody may be earning a high salary but they may well be irritated to observe that their occupational peers are earning more than they are. There is also a tendency to take longer-term advances for granted, such as the existence of a National Health Service, but then for dissatisfaction to build up round it, for example concerning extended waiting times for operations.

There is a sense in which the initial straightforward appeal of basic utilitarianism has been "leased out" to a set of institutional arrangements which—while not wholly losing touch with their origins—are relatively remote derivatives. Importantly too, the overall consequences of those arrangements for the extent of happiness and unhappiness evidently becomes difficult to track. There is some slight moral reassurance through the point that by people acting in their own individual interests, with the help of Adam Smith's "invisible hand", the general interest is thereby served. It is worth pointing up also that, while virtue ethics and the deontological approach continue to be relevant, the context for their application shrinks or becomes abbreviated. So, for instance, we spend much of our time shopping or as consumers and the main point at which morality enters is to say that the parties to a transaction should act honestly—which is not to say they are even required to point out any downsides to the other contracting party. Of course, consumers can take account of moral considerations in respect of their purchases e.g. whether the goods are eco-friendly or produced by well-paid labour, but, importantly, there is no requirement for them to do so; the primary motivating factor is price. Again, although—as noted—the notion that one should be kind to others has almost unlimited application, it is not seen as applying to relations between contracting parties, although they would be expected to exhibit

good manners.

7. Some Issues for a Modern Society

The challenge of modernism concerns the sheer complexity of society and the rapidity of social change. Above attention is given to the parental role. Yet the coming of the contraceptive pill in particular has led on to a reoriented feminist movement and an elaborately changed societal agenda affecting both the worlds of paid work and of domesticity. Same sex marriage and parenthood have become realities; so too has marriage become an option rather than a near requirement for cohabiting couples. Considerations of choice have thereby been advanced relative to considerations of duty or responsibility. Problems are raised for the application and received relevance of the deontological approach.

Above in connection with the latter approach attention was drawn to rights theory. As indicated Bills of Rights and the assertion of rights have become a perennial feature of political life since the Second World War. In this connection balance would be maintained were corresponding duties and responsibilities affirmed and allocated, but the modern period is marked by some relative failures in this respect leading to imbalance. One has already referred to the tendency for the state or government to become overloaded. The expression of rights by one group—for example by climate change activists—has consequences for others for which they are insufficiently prepared; the assertion of rights may tend to become adversarial. There is an underlying need for the awareness and exercise of rights on the one hand and that of duties and responsibilities on the other to move in step within the citizenry as a whole.

Where duties and responsibilities are defined and affirmed it is pertinent to ask: just what are the sanctions? In respect of criminality, the change from earlier centuries is massive, with much of previous practice seen as savagery. A change to be welcomed is the decline of elemental fear as a basis for conformity. Restriction of liberty by imprisonment is the most severe formal punishment. Increased scientific understanding of behaviour is also an influence as illustrated by the criminally mitigating factor of diminished responsibility. So too in educational settings corporal punishment has been outlawed and there is substantial recognition of children's special needs. Given the increasing range of behavioural options and the anonymity of mass society, shame, e.g. of being found guilty of an offence, is probably of declining effectiveness as a sanction. In these circumstances implicitly or explicitly greater weight is put on socialisation and education to produce responsible citizens. This is in a context where there is lack of consensus on the religious or secular nature of any overarching source for morality or the legitimacy of behaviour. Whether family socialisation and formal education can sufficiently meet the requirement for social control is open to doubt.

An altogether different development in many Western democratic societies warrants comment. It has some links to the rapidity of social change, which can lead to a sense of insecurity as groups compete to gain or retain relative

advantages. This particular development is centrally, but not exclusively, concerned with language usage and the issue of whose voice should be heard in debate. Relevant concepts are "political correctness", "safe spaces", the expression of "woke" views and the wish to "no-platform" speakers; systematic linguistic change from "sex" and "race" to "gender" and "ethnicity" is involved. The pattern is one of extreme sensitivity, tending towards intolerance, of the expression of views in anything other than an understood "canonical" form. Strikingly, it is virtually forbidden even to refer to the biological notion of race; also, there is ready and over-easy condemnation of the behaviour, often including the integrity, of past generations. Again, seemingly minor issues can become rapidly inflamed e.g. whether those of reassigned gender can take part in women's events in the Olympic Games, and whether such individuals may be transferred to women's prisons; also concern about appropriate lavatorial arrangements. Boundaries can become excessively important, as when an adult having sex with a seventeen-year-old girl is condemned, while if she were one year older it might pass without comment. Earlier one was saying there is a certain movement to a more flexible outlook on virtue ethics, but the tendency highlighted in this paragraph has a sharply narrow deontological character. It is not clear what limit could be put on the extension of its application going forward.

On a different point, it is apparent within modern societies, particularly in western and northern Europe, that universalism has advanced as an operative principle relative to particularism. This is strikingly the case in respect of the comprehensive nature of national health services and, more generally, in welfare state provision. But just how wide is the scope of universalism? If one asserts that the sick and injured are entitled to health care irrespective of their financial means, should not that also apply to foreigners? Why cannot they join in and benefit from these arrangements? In the modern world there is the paramount issue of movements of people including refugees giving rise to substantial immigration into the western democracies. The issue then rather becomes: Just how many immigrants may be accommodated? It is difficult to handle the problem in either deontological or consequentialist terms.

Another massively prominent item on the societal agenda is climate change and the need to check global warming. Interestingly, this does call for a further extension of the principle of universalism given our interdependencies and shared vulnerability on spaceship Earth. The implication is that there are heavy responsibilities on all of us, government and citizenry; almost all of our actions bear upon the issue of climate change. An ever-present but sometimes ignored issue becomes paramount: what exactly are our responsibilities towards future generations? An updated version of the deontological approach may be coming over the horizon.

8. Considerations of Morality and Ethics: A Challenge by Bernard Williams

The view developed here is that in a modern democratic society a modified form

of utilitarianism is in a central position; the deontological approach and virtue ethics continue to be relevant, although the latter is probably not being articulated in anything like its traditional form. Bernard Williams considers that the morality system, as he calls it, has objectionable features and he seeks to challenge it. His position hinges on the distinction between morality and ethics referred to at the outset above, and specifically for him ethics is the study of "living well as a human being" (Driver, 2022: section 1.2.1). He cites ethical considerations such as personal integrity and authenticity (Williams, 1985; Wolf, 1982). He lists various objectionable features of the morality system, including the inescapability and overridingness of moral obligation, the feature of impartiality, and the push towards generalisation. He feels there is a risk of "alienating people from their deepest values, cares and life projects" (Chappell & Smyth, 2023: introduction). There are those who consider his view of the morality system to be too narrow, but for our purposes here the nature and importance of his contribution is not difficult to identify.

Its value is apparent once you focus on the limited nature of utilitarianism and narrow thrust of the deontological approach. In short, neither has anything to say about the individuality of the agent; nothing is said about the agent's past life, their existing moral character, their interests or their central life purposes. From the point of view of classical utilitarianism the agent must effectively "drop everything" and adopt a utilitarian approach. A further issue—noted above—is that no other values that a moral agent holds or might hold in addition to the issue of pleasure and pain are expected or required to come into play. Now there is scope for utilitarianism to launch a limited response. It could be said that the modified form of the doctrine expressed through political and economic institutions offers some relevant scope. For instance, differing values may be reflected in voting and political action in a democracy; again, as noted, there is at least some scope for the expression of personal integrity and authenticity through one's actions as a consumer or as some other participant in market relations. However, this response is merely suggestive; it does not come near to a fully articulated defence of, or justification for, the limited nature of classical utilitarianism. In sum, a position approaching pure utilitarianism tends to founder when confronted with the ideal of personal integrity. Perhaps the only clear way of handling the issue is to say that the consequences of an action are only one aspect of its value and that its full evaluation will involve giving weight to factors of essentially different kinds (Craig, 2002: pp. 49-50).

It is also the case that the moral theories of deontologists, which aim to guide and assess our choices of what we ought to do, similarly fail to give attention to the individuality or personal integrity of the agent. Against this Williams seems to favour an appropriately modified version of virtue ethics which embraces such ethical considerations as personal integrity and authenticity. More important than the canon of moral obligation is the standard of "what makes life meaningful" (Chappell & Smyth, 2023: section 3). Williams' wish conceptually to enlarge the

set of ideas bearing upon the ethically and morally significant life is evidently soundly based.

9. Conclusion

Person-oriented virtue ethics fits well with a traditional society with a limited division of labour. The Ancient Greeks valued the courage possessed by a warrior chieftain or a statesman in furthering his city's welfare. Piety was valued; it took in duty to oneself and the gods but also concerned sustaining the social order while affirming one's own place in it. These ideas helped to shape the Western tradition but they were patently later subordinated to the character of the monotheism deriving from Ancient Judaism, in which virtue initially consisted in giving expression to God's will. Many specific qualities were valued but a key idea was that of God's commandment. From a modern perspective acting morally cannot simply consist of obeying orders or instructions. Hence it is significant that with the coming of Christianity that element was somewhat downplayed, opening the way for a broader conception of virtue alongside elements of a deontological approach. "Loving thy neighbour as thyself" represents a movement away from strict or minute regulation of behaviour towards a broader value and outlook concerned with life as a whole. Nevertheless, there is still a focus on the moral agent; indeed, perhaps particularly on his or her state of mind which, significantly, is understood to be known by God.

Nevertheless, it is of the essence that down the subsequent centuries the dominant position of Christian monotheism meant that the source of the meaning of life was sought not in the contingent finite nature of earthly existence but in that which was beyond and transcended it, which was the ultimate source of legitimation and justification. The contrast here is with an approach whereby one looks for meaning within life itself, which may be termed the immanent option (Blackburn, 2009: pp. 169-171). It is only with the coming of modernism that political and social concepts become foregrounded which lack a Christian (or some other) religious source; within this context there is a movement from an agent-centred to more of an action-centred approach. Of growing importance by the eighteenth century is rights theory but many still seek to situate it religiously as when John Locke proclaims natural rights to be given to us by God. From the outset, there is a potential for there to be a lack of balance between pursuance of rights and that of correlative duties. A particularly influential duty-based theory is that of Kant who details specific duties but is particularly known for his foundational principle of the categorical imperative. In one version the individual is required to treat others as an end, not merely as a means to an end. The problem here is that the whole nature of the industrial and capitalist society coming over the horizon in Kant's time could be said to be based on individuals and groups often taking an instrumental orientation to each other.

The coming of consequentialism, and in particular utilitarianism, represented a decisive move away from the transcendental to the immanent approach in

respect of the source of the meaning of life and the way in which the legitimation and justification of behaviour were to be grounded; meaning was to be sought in the finite nature of earthly existence. An urgent need, as part of a civilising process, was mitigation of the savagery of the formal punishments of earlier centuries; so also was there a need and demand for extended help by government for the poor. A broader principle or set of principles was required. The utilitarians came forward with a single principle which had the merit of being readily understood and appreciated, but there were almost bound to be doubts whether one such principle would ever be enough.

For the utilitarians the moral rightness or normative significance of an act or activity lies in its consequences: actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they produce the reverse of happiness. Because of the prior existence of a framework of institutions, notably the law, and again taking due account of the complexity of patterns of interaction, Mill and others developed the position of rule utilitarianism, which is to the effect that maximising utility will require the creation of a moral order containing rules. In an interesting and significant way, it became clear that the state is in an easier position than individuals in the sense that—particularly in the case of a democratic state—it can be taken (at least theoretically) to be equally responsible for all its citizens, rather than being biased by attachment to particular groups and individuals.

It is argued above that all three approaches to moral theory continue to be relevant to modern conditions, but apply more sharply at particular points. For instance, virtue ethics pertains particularly to parental roles and roles concerned with socialisation—particularly of the very young—and it also has relevance to professional roles more generally. On the other hand, in one clear respect the salience of the deontological approach at the political level is increasing for in the twentieth century the number of formally declared rights tended to expand considerably as in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of the United Nations in 1948. That approach also has relevance to adherence to such important society-wide concerns as being kind, telling the truth and keeping promises. Consequentialism comes particularly into its own where there is a policy issue focused on a minority but of concern to the state and society as a whole, such as legalising same sex relations or the assisted dying of terminally ill people.

Despite the continuing relevance of all three approaches, it has been argued that there has been a substantial turn towards a heavily modified utilitarianism, flowing directly from its ability to handle—unlike the other approaches—considerations of number and probability. The growth in understanding of the subject of probability and statistics and of its importance has been marked since 1900. The key developments associated with this reorientation are of parliamentary democracy and of market economies founded on property ownership. A government typically engages in policies after having assessed costs and the gains and losses for differing sections of the population and the relative sizes of those sections. That is essentially how the government has set about developing the welfare state.

The health service is universal because everyone potentially has health problems. Government policy also systematically tackles risk as can be seen from policies on road improvement and the response to covid-19. None of this can be strictly equated with utilitarianism but it is arguably the nearest practical approach to it. While being relevant to maximising happiness, the political system hardly handles the aspect that people's actual happiness depends upon observable relativities.

In the economic sphere the answer is to develop markets within which participants freely enter contractual relations. The concept of utility is fundamental in economics but the idea has evolved away from its origins to mean first "desiredness" and then, finally "preference". Interestingly the issue of relativities just noted above does enter into economics because, where people care about relativities, this can be reflected in their preferences, in the form of their pattern of purchases. There is a sense in which the initial straightforward appeal of basic utilitarianism has been "leased out" to a set of institutional arrangements which, while not wholly losing touch with their origins, are relatively remote derivatives. There is, however, some slight moral reassurance through Adam Smith's notion of the 'invisible hand', referring to mechanisms whereby the accumulated self-interested actions of individuals may give rise to overall beneficial economic and social outcomes.

Certain "pressure points" in a modern society are also noted *i.e.* issues posing problems pertinent to moral theory. Extensive migration poses problems for the principle of universalism. Climate change and global warming call for an updated deontological approach. Specifically at a micro-level the rapidity of social change affecting parental roles and family life challenges the relevance of a straightforward deontological approach. As a perennial problem, there is constant assertion of rights by individuals and groups but failure to match it with understanding and action regarding implications for duties and responsibilities; the problem of the overloaded state is probably getting worse. Particularly in relation to duties and responsibilities one must ask: just what are the sanctions? It is welcome that elemental fear has receded as a source of regulation, but too much may now be expected of family socialisation and formal education in relation to the issue of social control.

A notably challenging development, particularly in the UK and USA, and associated with concepts such as "political correctness", "safe spaces and "no-platforming", consists of a pattern of extreme sensitivity, tending towards intolerance, of the expression of views in anything short of an understood "canonical" form; seeming minor issues tend also to become rapidly inflamed and boundaries become excessively important. An atmosphere is created whereby some are silenced through fear. There is as yet no discernible limit to the extension of this pattern going forward.

Finally, it is noted that a significant challenge is mounted by Bernard Williams to what he calls "the morality system". He provides good reason to favour an appropriately modified version of virtue ethics which embraces such ethical

considerations as personal integrity and authenticity. Yet the assertion of that important element would continue to be within a political and economic context substantially shaped by utilitarianism.

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