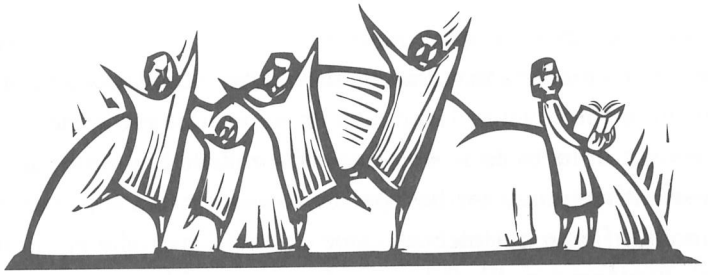
This way of thinking about right and wrong based on cool reasoning rather than emotion is very different from Aristotle's (see Chapter 2). For Aristotle, a truly virtuous person always has the appropriate feelings and does the right thing as a result of that. For Kant, feelings simply cloud the issue, making it more difficult to see that someone is genuinely doing the right thing, rather than just seeming to. Or to put a more positive spin on this: Kant made morality available to every rational person, whether or not they were fortunate enough to have feelings that motivated them to act well.

Kant's moral philosophy stands in stark contrast to that of Jeremy Bentham, the topic of the next chapter. Where Kant argued that some actions are wrong whatever consequences follow from them, Bentham claimed that it was consequences, and only consequences, that mattered.

CHAPTER 21



Practical Bliss

Jeremy Bentham

If you visit University College London you may be surprised to find Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), or rather what's left of his body, in a glass case. He is sitting looking out at you, with his favourite walking cane that he nicknamed 'Dapple' resting across his knees. His head is made of wax. The real one is mummified and kept in a wooden box, though it used to be on display. Bentham thought that his actual body – he called it an auto-icon – would make a better memorial than a statue. So when he died in 1832 he left instructions about how to deal with his remains. The idea has never really caught on, though Lenin's body was embalmed and put on display in a special mausoleum.

Some of Bentham's other ideas were more practical. Take his design for a circular prison, the Panopticon. He described it as 'a machine for grinding rogues honest'. A watchtower in the middle allows a few guards to keep an eye on a large number of

prisoners without them knowing whether or not they're being watched. This design principle is used in some modern prisons and even several libraries. It was one of his many projects for social reform.

But far more important and influential than this was Bentham's theory about how we should live. Known as utilitarianism or the Greatest Happiness Principle, this is the idea that the right thing to do is whatever will produce the most happiness. Although not the first person to suggest this approach to morality (Francis Hutcheson, for instance, had already done so), Bentham was the first to explain in detail how it might be put into practice. He wanted to reform the laws of England so that they were more likely to bring about greater happiness.

But what is happiness? Different people seem to use the word in different ways. Bentham had a straightforward answer to the question. It's all about how you feel. Happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain. More pleasure, or a greater quantity of pleasure than pain, means more happiness. For him, human beings were very simple. Pain and pleasure are the great guides to living that nature has given us. We seek pleasurable experiences and avoid painful ones. Pleasure is the only thing that is good in itself. Everything else we want because we believe it will give us pleasure or help us avoid pain. So if you want an ice cream, that isn't a good thing to have just for its own sake. The point of the ice cream is that it is likely to give you pleasure when you eat it. Similarly you try to avoid burning yourself because that would be painful.

How do you go about measuring happiness? Think about a time when you were really happy. What did it feel like? Could you put a number on your happiness? For instance, was it at a level of seven or eight out of ten? I can remember a trip on a water taxi leaving Venice that felt like a nine-and-a-half or

maybe even a ten when the driver accelerated away with the sun setting over the beautiful view, the spray from the lagoon in my face, and my wife and children laughing with excitement. It doesn't seem absurd to be able to give a mark for experiences like this. Bentham certainly believed that pleasure could be quantified and different pleasures compared on the same scale, in the same units.

The Felicific Calculus was the name he gave to his method for calculating happiness. First, work out how much pleasure a particular action will bring about. Take into account how long the pleasure will last, how intense it is, how likely it is that it will give rise to further pleasures. Then subtract any units of pain that might be caused by your action. What you are left with is the happiness value of the action. Bentham called this its 'utility', meaning usefulness, because the more pleasure an action brings about the more useful it is to society. That's why the theory is known as utilitarianism. Compare the utility of an action with the scores for other possible actions and choose the one that brings about most happiness. Simple.

What about the sources of pleasure, though? Surely it's better to get pleasure from something uplifting like reading poetry than from playing a childish game or eating ice cream, isn't it? Not according to Bentham. How the pleasure is produced doesn't matter at all. For him, daydreaming would be as good as seeing a Shakespeare play if they made you equally happy. He used the example of pushpin – a mindless game popular in his day – and poetry. All that counts is the amount of pleasure produced. If the pleasure is the same, the value of the activity is the same: from a utilitarian view, pushpin can be as morally good as reading poetry.

Immanuel Kant, as we saw in Chapter 20, argued that we have duties, such as 'never lie' that apply in all situations. Bentham,

however, believed that the rightness or wrongness of what we do comes down to the likely results. These can differ according to circumstances. Lying isn't necessarily always wrong. There might be times when telling a lie is the right thing to do. If, on balance, greater happiness results from telling a lie than not, then that is the morally right action in those circumstances. If a friend asks you whether a new pair of jeans is flattering or not, someone who followed Kant would have to tell the truth even if it wasn't what their friend wanted to hear; a utilitarian would work out whether greater happiness would result from telling a mild lie. If it would, then the lie is the right response.

Utilitarianism was a radical theory to put forward at the end of the eighteenth century. One reason was that in calculating happiness everyone's happiness was equal; in Bentham's words, 'Everybody to count for one, nobody to count for more than one'. No one gets special treatment. The pleasure of an aristocrat counted no more than the pleasure of a poor worker. That was not how society was ordered then. Aristocrats had a very great influence over how land was used, and many even had a hereditary right to sit in the House of Lords and decide on the laws of England. Not surprisingly, some felt uncomfortable with Bentham's stress on equality. Perhaps even more radical for the time was his belief that animals' happiness was relevant. Because they are capable of pleasure and pain, animals were part of his happiness equation. It didn't matter that animals couldn't reason or speak (though it would have done to Kant); those weren't the relevant features for moral inclusion in Bentham's view. What mattered was their capacity for pain and pleasure. This is the basis of many present-day campaigns for animal welfare, such as Peter Singer's (see Chapter 40).

Unfortunately for Bentham, there's a devastating criticism of his general approach with its emphasis on all possible causes of

pleasure being treated equally. Robert Nozick (1938–2002) invented this thought experiment. Imagine a virtual reality machine that gives you the illusion of living your life, but removes all the risk of pain and suffering. Once you have been plugged into this machine for a short while, you will forget that you are no longer experiencing reality directly and will be completely taken in by the illusion. This machine generates a whole range of pleasurable experiences for you. It is like a dream generator – it can make you imagine that, for example, you are scoring the winning goal in the World Cup, or having the vacation of your dreams. Whatever will give you the greatest pleasure can be simulated. Now, since this machine would clearly maximize your blissful mental states, you should, on Bentham's analysis, plug into it for the whole of your life. That would be the best way to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Yet many people, though they might enjoy experimenting with such a machine from time to time, would refuse to plug in for life because there are other things they value more highly than a series of blissful mental states. What this seems to show is that Bentham was wrong to argue that all ways of bringing about the same amount of pleasure are equally valuable, and that not everyone is guided solely by a desire to maximize their pleasure and minimize their pain. This is a theme that was taken up by his exceptional pupil and later critic, John Stuart Mill.

Bentham was immersed in his own age, keen to find solutions to the social problems that surrounded him. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel claimed to be able to stand back and get an overview of the entire course of human history, a history that was unfolding according to a pattern that only the most impressive intellects could grasp.