

## PAIR 1005 (Political Inquiry)

### Political Theory and Thought Experiments

Dr Ben Saunders ([B.M.Saunders@soton.ac.uk](mailto:B.M.Saunders@soton.ac.uk))

### The Aims of Normative Theory

- Prescriptive, rather than descriptive.
- Aspires to offer a general theory.
- Not simply judging whether X is F, but what it is for something to be F.
- See, e.g., Plato's *Republic*, 331b-d.

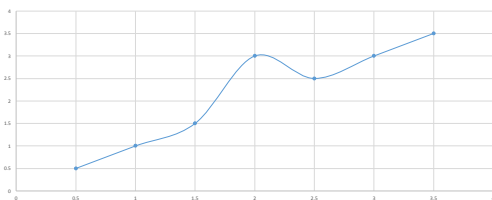
### Is this Practical? (1)

- Normative theory tells you what you ought to do.
- But theories often converge in their practical recommendations.
- Indeed, we should expect this in many settled cases.

### Is this Practical? (2)

- The point of a theory is not immediately practical.
- Newtonian physics works fine for just about any practical purpose, but it is still false.
- If your aim is practical, then do something.

### How Do we Produce a Theory?



### Where do we get 'Data'?

- The 'observations' of normative theory are usually judgements about particular cases.
- We may call these 'intuitions' – but this term has different meanings. (See H. Lillehammer 'The Epistemology of Ethical Intuitions' *Philosophy* 86 (2011), at pp. 181-5.)
- We are primarily interested in considered judgements.

## Should we Rely on Intuitions?

- Intuitions have been criticised as unreliable.
- We should not rely on them totally, but nor must we reject them all.
- We need to distinguish those we are confident in from our immediate gut reactions.

7

## What are our Experiments?

- We have intuitions about particular cases.
- These may be actual (historical), but often they are fictional.
- It helps if we can specify details, since we need to vary them to test our theory.

8

## Theory Testing

- Start with a proposed theory (hypothesis).
- Does it fit with a range of intuitions?
- If you find a counter example, can you adapt the theory?
- Consider the uses made by Miller (1983) and Thomson (1991).

9

## 'Reflective Equilibrium'

- Sometimes you adjust your theory to fit the 'data'.
- But sometimes you might revise your intuitions to fit the theory.
- This is particularly so where we have reason to doubt their reliability.

10

## 'Biting the Bullet'

- Someone might be prepared to accept what you take to be a devastating counter example.
- This happens in science too (e.g. Creationism).
- Be charitable. Is their position really so unpalatable? Does yours have costs also?

11

## The Limits of Thought Experiments

- The more unusual the case, the less certain we are likely to be about our intuitions.
- If all actual Xs are F, it may be hard to imagine an X that is not F, and our reactions may be influenced by F anyway.
- We should, generally, prefer realistic examples.

12