

In the Summer of 2009, Dr. Peter Drum, who teaches in the School of Philosophy at the Australian Catholic University, received a manuscript of *Moral Desert: A Critique*. He reacted by telling me that he thought its main thesis 'clearly false'. I asked him why he thought this and his reply led to a lengthy e-mail discussion of many issues raised in the book. Dr. Drum is a forthright commentator and I reproduce the dialogue here to stimulate interest in the book's subject-matter.

PD:

The reason I say that it is clearly false is that the thesis is deterministic; yet

- our experience is of being free;
- our experience is of having a conscience;
- our experience is of holding people accountable;
- if determinism were true we could not know it, because we are not then free to decide; but if we are free to decide, then it is not true;
- the argument seems to undermine itself in the conclusion, when it refers to trying to understand being a rational *obligation*;
- the adage "to understand all is to forgive all" cannot mean that if only we knew enough about evil-doers we would forgive them – indeed, it is precisely when we know enough about them that we cannot forgive them – e.g., Loeb and Leopold [the teenagers who murdered a 14-year-old boy in 1924 and were defended by Clarence Darrow along anti-retributive lines]. If the saying is true, it must mean something like this: understanding is a *necessary* condition for forgiveness.

HS:

To take your points in order:

- My experience is not of being free, exactly. It is that I often do not know precisely what causes my actions. It does not follow from this that they do not have causes.
- Having a conscience is not incompatible with determinism. Determinism does not itself rule out any particular sorts of causes for our actions. In particular it does not rule out some of them being caused by conscience, whatever that may turn out to be.
- I'm not committed to saying that we shouldn't sometimes 'hold people accountable'. There can sometimes be good consequentialist reasons for doing so. I'm only saying that this cannot be *merely* because they did certain sorts of things in certain states of mind.
- Knowing things does not entail that we are 'free to decide'. Why shouldn't we be compelled by the evidence (in conjunction with other factors, such as a predisposition to be so compelled)?
- Section 2.4 explains how we can have moral obligations even if determinism is true. Similar arguments would apply to rational obligation, I think.
- The point about the adage, as I understand it, is that if we know the full circumstances causing bad behaviour, we would be more likely to forgive the

agent, because we would realise that similar circumstances could equally well have applied to us.

PD:

Re: “My experience is not of being free, exactly.”

What does this mean? (E.g., I feel entirely uncompelled to write this note.)

Re: “It is that I often do not know precisely what causes my actions.”

Don't *you* cause them?

Re: “It does not follow from this that they do not have causes.”

Of course not – but nor does it follow that they have causes other than *agency*.

Re: “Having a conscience is not incompatible with determinism. Determinism does not itself rule out any particular sorts of causes for our actions. In particular it does not rule out some of them being caused by conscience, whatever that may turn out to be.”

To have a conscience means to have a sense of responsibility for our actions, so that we can suffer *remorse*.

Re: “I'm not committed to saying that we shouldn't sometimes 'hold people accountable'. There can sometimes be good consequentialist reasons for doing so.”

Yes, but these are *not* the reasons for us doing so.

Re: “I'm only saying that this cannot be *merely* because they did certain sorts of things in certain states of mind.”

But this *is* why we hold them to be accountable.

Re: “Knowing things does not entail that we are 'free to decide'. Why shouldn't we be compelled by the evidence (in conjunction with other factors, such as a predisposition to be so compelled)?”

But how do we *know* that the evidence is compelling if by it we are simply compelled?

Re: “Section 2.4 explains how we can have moral obligations even if determinism is true. Similar arguments would apply to rational obligation, I think.”

Perhaps – I would need to re-read that section.

Re: “The point about the adage, as I understand it, is that if we know the full circumstances causing bad behaviour, we would be more likely to forgive the agent,

because we would realise that similar circumstances could equally well have applied to us.”

A is tempted and gives in; B is similarly tempted and does not. So why should there be a difference of circumstances? A *chooses* to be weak, B to be strong.

HS:

I think we have to distinguish two senses of the word "free." In a weak sense, of course, I do experience freedom. This is the sense of freedom where it means non-compulsion or voluntariness. It is the sense emphasised by compatibilists, who think that this is the only kind of freedom. But I think that compatibilists are wrong, assuming that in calling our actions free, they want to hold us responsible for them and reward or punish us for them on non-consequentialist grounds. For it does not seem to follow from the fact that some of our actions are not compelled in the ordinary sense that we ought to be held responsible for them. For we may be determined and, if we are, this does appear to negate our responsibility.

Of course I cause my actions but I am talking about the more detailed causes. Alternatively, one might say I am asking about what causes me to cause them. I often don't know this and that may give me an illusion of freedom. [I might also have added that the notion of a single entity to which the word 'I' refers is also questionable.]

On the question of conscience, if determinism is true then, to an extent, our consciences mislead us, insofar as they make us think we are responsible for our actions when we are not. In another way, our consciences do not mislead us and are indeed very important to us, for they make us aware of bad things we have done (non-responsibly) and ideally make us less likely to do them again (in a way wholly compatible with determinism).

As far as holding people accountable is concerned, if this involves hurtful criticism or worse, it can only be justified (in my view) by its consequences in terms of a net balance of good over bad outcomes—or the consequences of a general practice of such criticism under the relevant sorts of circumstances. Wouldn't it be hard-hearted to condemn anyone unless it led to a net balance of good over bad outcomes?

On being compelled by the evidence, you say 'But how do we *know* that the evidence is compelling if by it we are simply compelled?' Although I've come across this sort of objection before, I've never wholly grasped it. The idea seems to be that the evidence can get a grip on us before we have judged that it is good evidence. Though that can happen, of course, it is also possible that we can judge it to be good and then because of that be compelled by it. I see no reason to doubt that this often happens. It certainly doesn't seem to be ruled out by determinism.

Re: “A is tempted and gives in; B is similarly tempted and does not. So why should there be a difference of circumstances? A *chooses* to be weak, B to be strong.”
Comment added later by H.S: If there is no difference in circumstances, then the only cause can be agency. But the concept of agency as the ‘action’ of a ‘self’ is hard

to make sense of, mainly because of the difficulty in understanding the concept of the self as an entity in its own right.

Going back to Clarence Darrow, I wonder if it had occurred to him that it might sometimes be necessary to punish people *even though* they don't deserve it—e.g. for public protection.

PD:

- Why is it that the obvious and simplest explanation of my actions – which is that *I cause them* – is ever seriously doubted?
- What you say about conscience does not explain the phenomenon of *remorse*.
- The utilitarian account of punishment may involve the judicial execution of the innocent, which is unacceptable.
- On the question of being compelled by the evidence: it seems to me that if we can step back from it and adjudge it, then our thinking must be free.
- Regarding your point about Darrow: I would need to revisit the case – presumably he would have argued for the detention of Loeb and Leopold, until they were no longer considered to be a threat to the community.

HS:

As I said, I don't deny that I cause my actions. What I suggest is that if anything else causes me to cause them then I am not truly free. While it would be odd to deny that I cause my actions, it would be equally odd to deny that my causing them itself has a cause. (Most things we know about have causes.)

In order to explain the phenomenon of remorse, we need only suppose that we *believe* ourselves to be morally responsible. It is not necessary to suppose that we actually are.

On the possibility that utilitarianism might require judicial execution of the innocent:

This is a common objection and I discuss it in some detail in Sec. 4.2. Basically, I maintain that utilitarianism would only require execution of the innocent under very rare circumstances, of the sort where the consequences of not taking this course would be truly terrible. In such a case, it would not be implausible to suppose that the utilitarian course is the right one, however repellent it may seem.

Re: "But if we can step back from [the evidence] and adjudge it, then our thinking must be free."

If by 'free' you mean 'uncoerced', I agree. But if you mean 'free' in the sense of 'morally responsible', I don't see any reason to accept this.

P.D:

Re: "It would be equally odd to deny that my causing them itself has a cause. (Most things we know about have causes.)"

It cannot be considered odd, since it fits our inner experience.

Re: "In order to explain the phenomenon of remorse, we need only suppose that we *believe* ourselves to be morally responsible. It is not necessary to suppose that we actually are."

But why do we believe it?

If judicial punishment of the innocent is repellent, then it cannot be right. And the rarity of it all is only coincidental.

Re: "If by 'free' you mean 'uncoerced', I agree [that proper assessment of the evidence must be free]. But if you mean 'free' in the sense of 'morally responsible', I don't see any reason to accept this."

In your case, the evidence makes you believe it; in mine, I decide whether I will believe it or not.

H.S:

I don't think that our experience is strictly speaking of our not being caused (to do what we do). It is experience of not being *aware* of a cause. You have another argument, which is I believe, that the simplest hypothesis is the best one and the simplest hypothesis in this case is that we are uncaused. But the simplest hypothesis is not *always* the best one. In this case it *conflicts* with our experience of almost everything having a cause of some kind.

Why do we believe that we are morally responsible? What does this belief amount to? I think it amounts to being prepared to take a certain normative stand, one that gives independent normative force in deciding how to treat a person to that person's actions and/or state of mind when performing them. I think that I can explain why we all start off believing this. It is that we are not brought up to use pure consequentialist thinking (we probably cannot be). Some of us later in life become exposed to such thinking, but I guess hardly any of us adopt it on a regular basis. Why is this? Presumably because the majority who don't, such as yourself, think something precious is lost if we do. But all I can do is try to persuade you that you're all wrong! (It wouldn't be the first time in history that nearly everyone has got something wrong.)

I don't accept that what is repellent cannot be right. This is certainly not an analytic truth. But I'm not sure that I can think of a counter-example that would convince you.

Re: "In your case, the evidence makes you believe it; in mine, I decide whether I will believe it or not."

If the evidence fails to make you believe it, then in your case something else overrides the force of the evidence.

These points aside, I think I'm getting to the point where I don't have much more to say. You're clearly a moral conservative and I'm not, and this accounts for much of the difference between us.

P.D:

Re: “You're clearly a moral conservative and I'm not, and this accounts for much of the difference between us.”

I cannot think why you would think this of *me* – the term refers to folk such as Lord Devlin, Mary Whitehouse, the Pope.

All I have said is that I repudiate any theory purporting to be of morality which sanctions *in principle if not in practice* such things as boiling an innocent man in oil, or bashing an innocent woman to death, or throwing battery acid on a baby.

And all I have said is that we *own* what we do, so we can be *truly* proud, or indifferent, or ashamed.

H.S:

Despite my earlier statement to the effect that I thought this discussion had run its course, I can't let your last remarks go without comment.

First, you misunderstand my use of the term 'moral conservative'. I would certainly imagine that you're not like any of the people you mentioned. This hasn't got anything to do with prudery. I meant that you don't seem prepared to countenance any significant changes to 'our ordinary moral consciousness.' I don't think this a sound approach to ethics, as I think that this consciousness can get things wrong (as Peter Singer and many others would agree). But if you don't like the term 'moral conservative' because of its associations, I won't insist on it.

Re: “All I have said is that I repudiate any theory purporting to be of morality which sanctions *in principle if not in practice* such things as boiling an innocent man in oil, or bashing an innocent woman to death, or throwing battery acid on a baby.”

Which is worse: one baby covered in battery acid or two? Surely two [all other things being equal]. So when there is no other choice, you should spatter the one baby--to do anything else would be to pay more attention to your own moral status than to the pain of the baby or babies. We should accept that and thank God we'll (probably) never have to make such a choice.

P.D:

Peter Singer is a philosophical fool (and, unfortunately for me and for the institution, i.e., the Uni. of Melbourne, originally hails from my *alma mater*). And, if what you are saying is true, the moon could very well be a balloon, despite any evidence thus far produced, and which ever might be produced, to the contrary.

H.S:

I think Peter Singer is one of the most significant philosophers of our time and perhaps *the* most significant Australian philosopher, but I doubt I'd have much success trying to persuade you of this!

More importantly:

You keep raising a problem for utilitarianism, as if you yourself don't face a problem. In my original scenario, would you or wouldn't you think it right to throw battery acid on the baby? If you say 'no' you are callous, as you won't act to prevent a situation in which more suffer. If you say 'yes' , you must admit that what is repellent can sometimes be right.

P.D:

Re: "I think Peter Singer is one of the most significant philosophers of our time and perhaps *the* most significant Australian philosopher, but I doubt I'd have much success trying to persuade you of this!"

No, *never!* And here are some of my reasons:

He thinks that *all and any* interest should count in morality.

He thinks that what is primarily wrong with infanticide is that *babies are liked for being cute.*

He thinks that we should *police the wild.*

He thinks that it is okay to have *sex with animals.*

He thinks that what was primarily wrong with the Nazi program is that *most people did not happen to share their interests.*

He thinks that the mentally retarded and the senile are *not people*, but certain animals *are.*

He thinks that we should not go to the movies *if we might do more good elsewhere.*

He thinks that academics should *mark to please*, although they will have to do this secretly, or the students will not be pleased.

He thinks that if an embryo is potentially a baby, so too is *an unfertilized egg*.

He thinks that human sexuality raises *no special moral issues*.

He thinks that since most people disagree with what he says, there must be something wrong *with them*.

The reason for Singer's popularity appears to be that he is *a prophet of popular causes*, but that does not make him a good philosopher. E.g., many people warm to him as a champion of euthanasia; but I doubt if they would feel the same way if they realized that this is for the sake of utility, *not their right to die*.

On the issue of the babies, what you said was "Which is worse: one baby covered in battery acid or two? Surely two. So when there is no other choice, you should spatter the one baby."

But I simply cannot understand how it can be that I have no other choice – why should I throw acid at all?

H.S:

I'm not sure about the accuracy of some of the remarks made by Drum regarding Singer's views. But here's what I said at the time.

I wouldn't agree with Singer on everything, but since you mention it, I do agree with his anti-speciesism. I think his point about *some* retarded humans and certain animals is that we have no more reason to regard these humans as 'people' or 'persons' than we have to say the same about those animals. But for him, 'person' is not a morally significant category anyway, and I agree with that.

You must surely realise that my example about one baby or two is a thought experiment and the conventions of such allow us to ignore the question of factual plausibility. However, if you want a similar example with a bit more plausibility, consider the following, due to Jonathan Glover. You are a doctor working for the Nazis. (It's not 'your fault' you found yourself in this position.) Your boss, a concentration camp commandant, orders you to perform some painful experiments on an inmate. You happen to know that if you do not, then another doctor, who is a sadist, will perform them and make them much more painful. If you do them you will make them more bearable, though still quite bad. (We may suppose that if you get rid of the pain altogether, you will be in trouble with the commandant.) What should you do?

P.D:

Re: "I think his point about *some* retarded humans and certain animals is that we have no more reason to regard these humans as 'people' or 'persons' than we have to say the same about those animals."

What?! Do you mean to say that retarded people do *not* have minds? Surely they are *rational* animals – a ship in dry dock is *still a ship*.

Re: “But for him, 'person' is not a morally significant category anyway, and I agree with that.”

Ditto.

Re: your new example to support utilitarianism—What you should do is resign.

When your utilitarian mob comes looking for *me or mine* in the name of achieving some great good or preventing some great evil, please do not expect the kind of welcome *such a morality should expect to receive*.

H.S:

Of course severely retarded humans have minds—but so do the animals. Whether a creature has a mind is testable and the sort of animals we're talking about—mainly primates—pass the tests hands down. But whether the retarded people are *rational* is more doubtful. (Perhaps they do up to a point.) But the same is true of the primates.

Re: If it is necessary, resign.

If you resign the inmate will experience more pain—at the hands of the sadist. Still, I can think of one reason for resigning—the prospect of doing the Nazi's work for him might be *felt* to be so troubling that it would drive you mad, in which case you would be no use to anyone. But in practice it might be very hard to determine whether this would actually be the case—which of us can be truly certain how much stamina we have? In any case, to obey the Nazis is not *obviously* wrong in this situation.

Re: “Okay, but when your utilitarian mob comes looking for *me or mine* in the name of achieving some great good or preventing some great evil, please do not expect the kind of welcome *such a morality should expect to receive*.”

The mob won't come looking for you or anyone else in this manner, or if they do it would only be through a gross misreading of what I and other utilitarians are saying.

P.D:

Re: “Of course severely retarded humans have minds—but so do the animals. Whether a creature has a mind is testable and the sort of animals we're talking about—mainly primates—pass the tests hands down.”

I doubt that primates have minds, but if they do, then *good for them!*

Re: “But whether the retarded people are *rational* is more doubtful.”

They *are* rational, in the same way that someone who has *lost his mind* is – he has simply lost the *use* of reason.

As for the concentration camp inmate, if it is guaranteed that he will be worse-off in my absence, then I guess he would *want me to stay*.

Re: “The mob won't come looking for you or anyone else in this manner, or if they do it would only be through a gross misreading of what I and other utilitarians are saying.”

No it is *not*! The theory says that it is incumbent upon us to go like *lambs to the slaughter* if this is necessary in order to achieve some great good or to prevent some great evil, and that if we refuse, we can be *made to do so*.

H.S:

You now concede that in the concentration camp case, it might be right to do the experiments. In that case, you are at least bound to accept that what is repellent may be right. The next stage would be to consider a case where the choice is not between inflicting suffering on person *A* and allowing worse suffering for person *A* but between inflicting suffering on person *A* and allowing worse suffering for a different person *B*. This is very different in character from the former type of case because there would be two potential victims and you would be bound to violate the right of at least one of them not to experience suffering through your actions—unless you want to appeal to the distinction between bringing something about and letting it happen, a dodgy move surely, and one that you didn't seem inclined to make when dealing with the original example.

P.D:

Re: “You now concede that in the concentration camp case, it might be right to do the experiments. In that case, you are at least bound to accept that what is repellent may be right.”

No, the *first* reason why it is wrong to harm someone is because doing so is *against his will* – if he *wants* me to do so, and *it is necessary*, there is nothing repellent about it – it is, rather, just an *awful* thing for me to have to do.

Re: “[In the new example] there would be two potential victims and you would be bound to violate the right of at least one of them not to experience suffering through your actions.”

No, since no-one has the *right* to harm an innocent party, no rights are violated – what happens is just that *B cannot be helped*.

(But what is this talk about rights – I thought yours was a *utility* theory?!)

Re: "...unless you want to appeal to the distinction between bringing something about and letting it happen, a dodgy move surely, and one that you didn't seem inclined to make when dealing with the original example."

What is dodgy about it? Doing injustice is the greatest of evils, so that if nothing can be done justly, then, tragically, nothing can be done.

H.S:

"Awful thing for me to have to do", "repellent"—not much difference, as far as I can see.

Since no-one has the *right* to harm an innocent party, no rights are violated – what happens is just that B *cannot be helped*.

Re: "(But what is this talk about rights – I thought yours was a *utility* theory?!)"

I try to be as 'inclusive' as possible. I don't want to repudiate all talk of rights if I don't have to. But rights are not absolute. The right not to be lied to, for example, is one that an indirect utilitarian like myself can recognise, but such rights can often be overridden. A different sort of right is *built into* utilitarianism, so to speak—the right not to be caused or be allowed to suffer. This right can be overridden by the need to prevent worse suffering for the same person or another. In such a case, someone's right is bound to be violated and it might as well be the one who would suffer less. You claim that no-one has the right to harm an innocent party. On my view, such a right is possessed by the agent in a case of this kind, a right created by the need to minimise suffering.

If you want to appeal to the distinction between bringing about something and letting it happen, then I don't know what would change your mind. It may be a point of basic evaluative disagreement that goes beyond argument. For me, the consequences, that is, the *total* consequences, are all-important. For you, how these consequences come about has independent moral significance.

P.D:

Re: "Awful thing for me to have to do', 'repellant'--not much difference, as far as I can see."

Isn't "repellent" about *repelling* = resisting? Anyway, okay.

Re: "I try to be as 'inclusive' as possible. I don't want to repudiate all talk of rights if I don't have to."

Why not?

E.g., Peter Singer once said that in his case he regretted his use of the term “rights”, and that this was merely a concession to “popular rhetoric” – but, of course, this utterly *fails to explain why the rhetoric is popular!*

Re: “But rights are not absolute. The right not to be lied to, for example, is one that an indirect utilitarian like myself can recognise, but such rights can often be overridden.”

Okay, but since you are speaking of *rights*, you would need to establish when and *why* it is the case others’ rights are trumps.

Re: “A different sort of right is *built into* utilitarianism, so to speak—the right not to be caused or be allowed to suffer. This right can be overridden by the need to prevent worse suffering for the same person or another.”

Rights can only be trumped by *rights*.

Re: “In such a case, someone's right is bound to be violated and it might as well be the one who would suffer less.”

No – if this happened, the right in question would not be an *absolute* right – e.g., someone’s *property* might be requisitioned by the state, in certain circumstances.

Re: “You claim that no-one has the right to harm an innocent party. On my view, such a right is possessed by the agent in a case of this kind, a right created by the need to minimise suffering.”

Again, you would need to establish *why* you have the *right* to play God. (And, indeed that even God has this *right!*)

Re: “If you want to appeal to the distinction between bringing about something and letting it happen, then I don't know what would change your mind. It may be a point of basic evaluative disagreement that goes beyond argument.”

I do not think so. All I am saying is this: *unless* it can be *established* that someone’s suffering is *owed* to someone else, then the second party has no *right* to it; and therefore, nor does any do-gooder, who wants to help the second party to the detriment of the first.

Re: “For me, the consequences, that is, the *total* consequences, are all-important. For you, how these consequences come about has independent moral significance.”

Yes, because unless it can be *established* that a man *owes* his life to others, how else *could* it be?

H.S:

I said:

“A different sort of right is *built into* utilitarianism, so to speak—the right not to be caused or be allowed to suffer. This right can be overridden by the need to prevent worse suffering for the same person or another.”

And you countered:

“Rights can only be trumped by *rights*.”

But perhaps I should have said:

“This right can be overridden by *another's stronger right not to suffer more*.”

In that case I can perhaps agree with you that rights can only be trumped by rights.

Re: “...if this [trumping a right for utilitarian gain] happened, the right in question would not be an *absolute* right – e.g., someone’s *property* might be requisitioned by the state, in certain circumstances.”

We don't think that it is right to requisition people's property in order, for example, to pay for another's expensive operation. But that is because we don't think it would be in our interests to live in a society in which the state had that sort of power—or at least that's *my* reason. And that's because of what I think it would be like in practice to live in that sort of society, i.e., consequentialist thinking.

Re: “Again, you would need to establish *why* you have the *right* to play God. (And, indeed that even God has this *right!*)”

I don't think we can avoid 'playing God.' Grave consequences may follow, whether we act or do nothing, consequences for which we are at least causally responsible.

P.D:

Re: “We don't think that it is right to requisition people's property in order, for example, to pay for another's expensive operation. But that is because we don't think it would be in our interests to live in a society in which the state had that sort of power—or at least that's *my* reason. And that's because of what I think it would be like in practice to live in that sort of society, i.e., consequentialist thinking.”

But why would it be any different than in my case, except that there would be *a lot more of it?*

Furthermore, a consistent utilitarian *should* accept that it would be good to live in such a society!

Re: “I don't think we can avoid 'playing God.' Grave consequences may follow, whether we act or do nothing, consequences for which we are at least causally responsible.”

No-one is or should be held responsible for not preventing an evil when there is no rightful means of them doing so; *nor would any decent person want evil to be done on their behalf.*

H.S:

Re: “But why would it be any different than in my case, except that there would be *a lot more of it?* Furthermore, a consistent utilitarian *should* accept that it would be good to live in such a society!”

It would be different because it would be happening so often that it would affect people's sense of security. They would wonder whether there was any point working hard (and thus contributing to society's wealth) if their possessions might so easily be taken from them. Many of them would decide not to do so. Note also that a real state, as opposed to a utopian one, would probably be tempted to engage in such action more often than strict utilitarianism would sanction. (It would start doing it for corrupt reasons.)

Re: “No-one is or should be held responsible for not preventing an evil when there is no rightful means of them doing so; *nor would any decent person want evil to be done on their behalf.*”

But use of the terms 'no rightful means' and 'evil' just begs the question.

P.D:

Re: “It would be different because it would be happening so often that it would affect people's sense of security. They would wonder whether there was any point working hard (and thus contributing to society's wealth) if their possessions might so easily be taken from them. Many of them would decide not to do so.”

Okay, but this means that either:

- (1) utilitarianism as a moral theory is merely a theory of the possible—it accepts that people are not-so-good, and writes this into the *moral theory*; or,
- (2) that there is something wrong *with the theory*, not with the people.

The point is a moral theory should be about *what people should do*, not what they *will do!*

Re: “Note also that a real state, as opposed to a utopian one, would probably be tempted to engage in such action more often than strict utilitarianism would sanction. (It would start doing it for corrupt reasons.)”

If by “corrupt” you mean “reasons that do not maximize utility”, I cannot see why this is not a problem for the account *generally*.

Re: “But use of the terms 'no rightful means' and 'evil' just begs the question.”

No. There are evils and Evils – natural evils, and the evil of being *wronged*. What a person wants most of all is *not to be wronged* by his fellows, and a decent person not to have others *wronged in his name*.

H.S:

Well, R.M. Hare often said that utilitarianism should be designed for the real world. If so, this must take into account people's weaknesses. It is still a theory of what people should do, but one that takes account of what we know about human nature. Anything else would not be very much *practical* use, whatever other merits it might have.

Re: “If by “corrupt” you mean “reasons that do not maximize utility”, I cannot see why this is not a problem for the account *generally*.”

Yes, that's more-or-less what I meant. It is not a problem for the reason cited above.

Re: “There are evils and Evils – natural evils, and the evil of being *wronged*. What a person wants most of all is *not to be wronged* by his fellows, and a decent person not to have others *wronged in his name*.”

Speaking personally, while the things you mention seem important, what I want most of all is not to undergo extreme suffering or, if it must be done, that the intensity of suffering should be as little as it can be.

P.D:

Re: “...this must take into account people's weaknesses.”

So, they should be *told* that they are weak, and that they *should be strong*.

(Of course, they cannot be told, for they *will not believe it!*)

Re: “...what I want most of all is not to undergo extreme suffering.”

“Most” of all? What if someone else were to suffer similarly *in your name*?

H.S:

When I said that what I want most is to avoid extreme suffering, this was over-simplifying a bit. We can distinguish three presumptive needs or desires:

1. The self-interested desire to minimise one's own suffering.
2. The pure utilitarian requirement to minimise suffering generally.

3. A moral aversion to causing or allowing others to suffer, especially to benefit ourselves.

For the utilitarian, obviously (2) is fundamental and it counsels us to cause suffering under certain circumstances (but it very rarely counsels us to cause extreme suffering).

(1) is just a fact of life. Utilitarians must partly fight it, partly accommodate themselves to it.

(3) is not a pure utilitarian requirement and is, indeed, incompatible with utilitarianism when it does not lead to the overall minimising of suffering. However, it is a socially useful thing in general as it tends to counteract the powerful influence of (1).

Your question implies a scenario in which (3) conflicts with (1). If the suffering were relatively mild, I think (3) would win. If it were more extreme I do not know what I would do. (2) doesn't tell us what to do unless the amounts of suffering are different in the 2 alternatives. If the other person would suffer less, (2) says that I should let him suffer (all other things being equal); if he would suffer more, then (2) tells me I should be the one to suffer. That doesn't seem unreasonable to me, all things considered. Though I would still feel the force of (3), I don't think it's sacrosanct—it's meant for ordinary situations, not extraordinary ones.

P.D:

Re: “For the utilitarian, obviously (2) is fundamental and it counsels us to cause suffering under certain circumstances (but it very rarely counsels us to cause extreme suffering).”

But, by what right can we cause others to suffer, or even countenance the possibility of causing them to suffer extremely? No law admits this.

Re: “(3) is not a pure utilitarian requirement and is, indeed, incompatible with utilitarianism...”

So ...

Re: “I would still feel the force of (3)... “

Whence, though, the force?

Re: “I don't think it's sacrosanct—it's meant for ordinary situations, not extraordinary ones.”

Why say this?

At this point, I suggested to Dr. Drum that we bring the discussion to a halt, as there did not seem much more to say. Looking back at this dialogue now, I feel that while it raises some interesting points, its lack of progress in reaching agreement is typical of much debate in ethics. I believe situations like this lend some support to the idea that there are irresolvable disagreements in ethics (although of course they do not prove this—perhaps we were just not clever enough to see a resolution!). Each of the participants is committed to certain basic moral positions and rational argument will not alter their views. This does not entail that ethics is beyond the scope of reason. Reasoned argument can promote some degree of convergence, but stark disagreements between representatives of different moral positions will always remain, in my view.