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The Ten Commandments

Survival Based Ethics (SBE) and how the Ten Commandments measure up

Introduction to SBE

This page primarily examines the Mosaic Ten Commandments under the microscope of Survival Based Ethics. SBE is our attempt at a philosophically consistent conclusion we arrived at in trying to answer the [Third Question](#). If you haven't a clue what we're talking about, you probably ought to read at least [Chapter 6](#) and 7 before wasting any more of your time here.

We've referred to SBE many times in the Chapters from 6 onwards but we haven't had the chance to describe them in any detail. If we are going to use SBE to analyse the Ten Commandments, however, we need to understand a bit more about SBE first.

All ethical systems claim to answer the (third) question "How should we behave?". They then present a number of propositions intended to deal with different ethical scenarios. This results in "holy books" or bodies of "law" usually expressed in multiple volumes of densely filled literature. Any expert in such law can usually find one or more expressions of it which either forbid or permit almost any activity they wish to attack or defend.

In contrast, under SBE, we argue that there are, in fact, only two, very simple, fundamental or "root" behavioural propositions which are all we need to answer all possible ethical questions:

Pursue Pleasure

and/or

Avoid Pain

We further argue that all other attempts at behavioural propositions can either be recast in SBE terms or they are probably not legitimate behavioural propositions.

You'll probably recognise echoes of Jeremy Bentham's basis for Utilitarianism - "The

Greatest Good For the Greatest Number". In fact our only serious quarrel with Bentham (as a general guide to "the common good" - not, though, the "last word") would be his value judgement that "Pleasure is Good". Even an almost universally held opinion does not count as an objective fact (other than in the rather narrow linguistic sense that "pleasure" is one of the ways in which we define "good") Think chocolate. Do you like chocolate? Does that make it "good" (or "bad" if you said "no") in any objective culinary sense? Think Art. Do you prefer Picasso to Dali? Does that make Picasso/Dali objectively the better artist. "No" is the obvious answer to both. Objectivity in aesthetics is just as nonsensical as objectivity or absolutes in Ethics. In both cases we make up the rules as we go along.

In the case of SBE, they are very easy "rules" to follow because they're what we (and all other living things) do all the time, albeit usually unconsciously. The significant difference with SBE, is that we advocate that we all adopt those rules consciously rather than unconsciously; and, crucially, as a social guide rather than mere individual drive.

As a guide to social behaviour, the SBE propositions are intended to be read and practised in the widest relevant social context and not merely as a convenient justification for looking after your own selfish interests. This is not to say that SBE opposes naked self interest. (It would only oppose such behaviour if it were pursued at the expense of a third party) However, merely pursuing self interest misses the whole point of SBE which is that collaboration with others in order to Pursue Pleasure and/or Avoid Pain (or to enable such practice) will benefit us all. So pursuit of self interest *alone*, where wider benefit is available is not a breach of SBE, just a missed opportunity to improve the human condition.

If you like, you should consider the clumsy phrase "as widely as reasonable and possible in the circumstances" to be tacked on to each of the two propositions above.

Thus "doing the right thing" in SBE terms doesn't just mean enjoying yourself (though we have absolutely no problem with that) but, if and when the opportunity arises, doing what you can to promote or enable such enjoyment as widely as possible. Similarly if others are in pain - or would be if nothing were to change - and you are able to do something to improve their situation or prospects, then again, SBE advocates that you to do what you can to prevent, eliminate or at least minimise the relevant pain.

The language is also important. Rather than phrases like "doing the right thing" or "bad/wrong/evil" it is more accurate to talk of action or inaction being SBE positive, neutral or negative.

For example, failure to promote pleasure, where possible, would be regarded as SBE neutral. It doesn't benefit anyone, but neither does it cause harm. Conversely, failure to mitigate pain, where an opportunity exists, can be said to make one partially responsible for any further pain suffered after such an opportunity has been recognised and avoided. This

would, therefore, be regarded as SBE negative.

Our use of the terms "Ethical" and "Unethical" should be taken to mean the same as SBE positive or SBE negative respectively.

These terms matter because, despite the "doing the right thing" phrase above, SBE doesn't *ever* claim such behaviour is "right" or "proper" or "good". Nor does it claim that failure to behave this way or even deliberately reducing pleasure/increasing pain is "wrong", "improper" or "evil". We do use those terms from time to time for the sake of brevity and style but they must be understood as a form of colloquial shorthand. "Evil" is much easier to write than *"activity which deliberately reduces pleasure or increases pain to the benefit of a perpetrator and at the expense of a third party who has not given their free and informed consent"* but, if we ever use the word, that's what we mean. "Evil" is also much more widely recognised and understood than "SBE Negative".

One of the few words we try to avoid altogether is "Moral" or its derivatives, morality, immorality etc.

SBE makes no value judgements whatsoever. For which reason we do not consider SBE to be just another attempt at "moral philosophy". It is a complete replacement or substitute for "moral philosophy". All moral philosophy is based on the premise that there are some absolute universal principles of "good and evil" or "right and wrong". SBE is based on the exact opposite - that the very notion of such absolutes is inherently and literally nonsense.

SBE logic is based on the simple empirical hypothesis that if we do all behave as SBE suggests, then we will, on average, benefit with longer and better lives. No other justification is necessary. We don't even argue that longer and better lives are themselves a "good thing". We don't need to. It's simply a "fact" that most of us *do want* longer and better lives whether that is a good thing or not. So if you, like me, want to see an increase in overall average longevity and quality of life, that is all you need to adopt SBE.

For which reason, we see no reason why every human being cannot adopt SBE as soon as they become aware of it. It does NOT mean giving up all their other beliefs, as we'll explain below. It is merely a lens through which all our other behavioural guides can be viewed more clearly.

It is, of course, no accident that many of the conclusions we might reach under SBE are similar to the conclusions reached by many moral philosophies. For example, following SBE logic, we can justify an even stricter line on "Thou Shalt Not Kill" than the monotheist religions. (if you haven't just come from there, see the discussion on "[Thou Shalt Not Kill](#)" in Chapter 10 part two) Of course, we may or may not achieve consensus with that

argument, but it remains a good example of SBE analysis regardless.

This congruence is inevitable because all attempts at answering the third question will reflect, to some degree, the wisdom and consensus of the human race acquired over tens of thousands of years. It is hardly surprising that many of the conclusions the ancient philosophies have reached will reflect the general desire to live longer and have improved quality of life - whether or not they formally recognise those goals as specific aims.

But, unlike moral philosophies, which all make the mistake of trying to start from the position of "moral absolutes" which simply do not exist, the means by which SBE arrives at its conclusions are (or should be) always consistent with the philosophical principles and limitations we have outlined in answering the first two questions.

Previous philosophers have identified the emperor's nudity (the obvious absence of unequivocal moral guidance in the Universe) but may have baulked at drawing the obvious conclusion and, instead, tried to conjure some "first principles" out of the metaphysical ether. Why? I don't know. I speculate that it is because they haven't been able to imagine how to control - or at least justify controlling - society in the absence of absolutes. My suspicion is that in place of the search for objective "moral" truth, they have sought to justify a straightforward prejudice in line with millennia of cultural conditioning. Viz: that society needs to be controlled by those best suited to such control. Rather than an honest search for ethical insight, they have chosen to justify either the status quo or their reason for replacing it with their own preferred system.

What SBE shows is that it is possible to face and live with the truth. We can still have a sensible and pragmatic guide to ethical behaviour despite the absence of absolutes.

SBE Is Not A Control Mechanism

The key is that SBE is not designed to control society or as a means of justifying such control. SBE is not prescriptive. It doesn't attempt to formulate a comprehensive set of rules under which society can be run. It doesn't even try to supplant other ethical systems. It merely provides a baseline against which all other ethical propositions can be measured - as we are about to demonstrate with the Ten Commandments.

SBE is ideologically neutral. Existing rulers will resist it because it challenges their control. It doesn't challenge their ideology, though. It just forces them to submit their ideas for democratic approval. Hence it can coexist with Capitalism or Communism. It can live with religion - and, I suspect, only fundamentalist religion would have real difficulty in living with it. SBE is our lowest common denominator; the point at which all humans can agree, regardless of their belief systems. No human of sound mind would oppose or deny the basic principles of pursuit of pleasure or avoidance of pain. They might argue about what

constitutes acceptable ways to pursue pleasure or avoid pain, but none will argue that those two drives are not present and prominent in all human beings.

Neither, once it has been explained, are they likely to argue with the notion that their own rules are mostly expressions of those two drives.

As such SBE provides a mechanism for comparing apparently conflicting ethical propositions using the same tools regardless of the origin of those propositions. This, in turn, can be used in conflict resolution to clarify the rival parties propositions to each other and to the wider world. This will not, by itself, resolve any conflicts but it should at least simplify the explanation of the conflicts and illuminate possible strategies for resolution.

That being so, we foresee and propose that all social decisions be "filtered" through SBE for public consumption prior to any decision being made..

We further propose that all social decisions are reached by measuring the opinions of all those within the relevant constituency (those affected by the prospective decision). (Now you see why some fundamentalists, particularly those who oppose democracy, will find it difficult to live with SBE)

SBE offers a means of determining whether a given human has a legitimate interest in a decision as opposed to a mere desire to influence social behaviour from outside the constituency. (See [SBE Decision Making](#) for details)

The process of measuring opinions is inherently democratic, of course, but we do not advocate mere "majority rule" which we regard as potentially dangerous in that it does not - on its own - provide sufficient protection for dissenting minorities. In particular it allows for huge minorities to find themselves on the wrong side of a democratic decision, which, depending on the question, can be a recipe for civil war.

We advocate, instead, the search for consensus. (meaning, in this context, the agreement of 95% plus of the constituency) Pragmatically, however, we recognise that, in today's fractured world, consensus will often be difficult or impossible to achieve, and that the option of making no decision at all may not be a realistic choice.

In these circumstances we advocate majority rule but using a voting algorithm which rewards attempts to compromise with "the other side". We remind all parties that in most cases, it is impossible to prove the dissenter is objectively "wrong." That being so, we try to play safe by ensuring that our starting point in any debate is always "can we achieve consensus?"

If and when that fails the fallback question is not "is there a majority in favour of X" but rather "how close to consensus can we get?" This encourages participants to consider not just "am I in favour of X" but also "how much does it matter to me?" This too is explained in greater detail under [SBE Decision Making](#).

The result is that most rules will have very healthy levels of democratic support and "We The People" can maintain full and flexible control over the decision making process. While it cannot guarantee greater protection for dissenting minorities, it should increase the probability of proper concern for dissent by focussing attention first on the obstacles to consensus and secondly on the question of how strongly the opposing sides take their different positions.

Ultimately it permits a dissenter to declare themselves a "conscientious objector" much like we see for pacifists in times of war, or as we see in permitting modern gynaecologists not to perform abortions if they have moral objections. Whether and how the ruling majority decides to cope with such conscientious objections is a separate democratic question for that majority. It might, for instance, take a hard line on conscientiously objecting cannibals but be prepared to tolerate dissenting - oh I don't know - obnoxious atheists perhaps!

All of which might look rather abstract and theoretical. Its actually pretty simple, but see the previous link for details and examples.

The point being that SBE has nothing concrete to say about the "right way to behave" with a single exception: The "right way" to decide the "right way to behave" is through the democratic process with consensus as the prime target. Not because it is ethically superior - that can no more be demonstrated than any other absolute right or wrong, but because harnessing the intelligence of all members of society, if done intelligently, is more likely to produce effective solutions and long term enhancement to all our lives.

The crucial word is "intelligently". But we digress, this is discussed in detail in the SBE Decision Making link.

SBE deals only with the decision making goals (pursuit of pleasure, escape from pain) and the decision making process - it does not preclude or dictate any particular decision. Its sole purpose is to ensure that whenever society feels the need to make a rule which proscribes or prescribes social behaviour, that as many people as possible understand and agree the need for the rule and the content of the rule. The larger the proportion who agree with any given rule, the less likely it is to be infringed and the less effort society will have to invest in policing the rule.

Obviously SBE could not become the guide to decision making without achieving

consensus itself. Given my occasionally vitriolic attacks on religion, it may seem somewhat perverse that I am apparently prepared to alienate the [84% of the global population \(local\)](#) who still believe in deities of one kind or another and still expect them to adopt the SBE model I propose.

Don't confuse my personal opinions with SBE.

I am unashamedly opposed to religion and nearly all it stands for. SBE is not. SBE is indifferent.

SBE will simply allow whatever consensus or majority exists to be clarified and codified as "the law" until or unless the consensus disintegrates or the majority changes its mind. I do not expect to agree with all the decisions made under SBE. On the contrary, I expect to be in the minority on more occasions than most.

For example, were SBE available today, I would be arguing that while it might be reasonable to permit religious practice to continue between consenting adults, it ought not to be allowed to be imposed on young children. Religious indoctrination of children is, in my view, child abuse and should be outlawed along with all other child abuse. I doubt if even many of my readers would be prepared to support me on that one, let alone the wider - still mostly religious - community. Hence my chances of winning consensus or even substantial majority on that issue would be approximately zero. So the actual policy agreed under the SBE based system I propose would no doubt retain the status quo and permit the continued indoctrination I oppose.

This should illustrate a couple of things. As we said right back at Chapter One, the object is not to tell you how to run society, merely *how to decide* how to run society. And although SBE is revolutionary in one respect (giving full power to the people and removing it from leaderships of all kinds) it is pointedly not revolutionary in the social sense. It will not allow or impose changes which the majority of the population (or even significant minority) do not want. Religion is a good example. Obviously, on a personal basis, I would love to eliminate it and it would be tempting (and fairly easy) to conjure up philosophical arguments to justify its abolition. But whether I like it or not, it wouldn't be democratic because, for the moment, the majority of humans are still superstitious and wish to cling to their religious crutches.

Having said all that, the point of living in a true democracy is that if I am to be required to live with rules with which I do not agree, I demand that at least a substantial majority of my fellow citizens can be shown to support those rules. I will then probably accept them, even if reluctantly, for two reasons. First I am a natural democrat rather than autocrat. If the majority want or choose to believe something I don't, I recognise the mathematical fairness of accepting a majority decision. Secondly, of course, opposing the majority might cost me

my life or liberty.

Of course, like an outvoted dissenter who has just been nominated as lunch by his democratic cannibal comrades, if the agreed rules threaten my life or liberty directly then I may well take my chances in opposing them regardless of any consensus or majority support, but, hopefully, such instances would be very rare.

As for the situation as it is today, why should we even begin to tolerate those rules which can be seen to be increasing pain or reducing pleasure and for which no such democratic support can be demonstrated? Such rules constitute illegitimate restrictions on our liberty and, sometimes lives.

By the same token that we do not need to justify wanting longer and better lives, neither do we need to justify feeling entitled and sometimes obligated to do all in our power to resist or subvert many of the illegitimate SBE negative laws under which we live today. We still, of course, have the problem that those currently in charge of making the rules have the power to threaten our lives and further restrict our liberties.

We must also recognise that there is already more than enough violent conflict in the world. We don't want or need to add to that violence. Indeed, as the whole point of SBE and this book is to offer intelligent ways to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence, then any conflict arising from our attempt to introduce SBE should always be handled (at least on our side of the argument) as an example of how to avoid conflict becoming violent.

So much for SBE. How does it help clarify other ethical systems?

Analysing Answers to the Third Question

The first question we ask when faced with any attempt at behavioural guidance is "is it an ethical proposition?" If it is, it should be possible to re-cast it as an SBE proposition in one or more of the the following forms:

X increases pleasure and/or reduces or eliminates pain. Therefore X is SBE positive

or

X reduces pleasure and/or increases or maintains pain. Therefore X is SBE negative

or

X has no effect on either pleasure or pain. Therefore X is SBE neutral

We will find there are examples of "moral" propositions which cannot be recast in one of the forms above and this usually reveals that the propositions are not meaningful ethical propositions at all. Often that's because they are merely authoritarian instructions.

It may be wise, nevertheless, to follow such instructions for pragmatic reasons - if, for example, the source of the instructions has some means of forcing you to do so or detecting and punishing you if you don't. But, unless the person being instructed has given **tfaic** ("**their free and informed consent**" - a phrase we will need to use often, so we prefer the abbreviation) to being so instructed, there is no ethical basis which either justifies the issue of such instructions or compels obedience to them.

The First Commandment is a classic example of just such an instruction and we'll come to that in a moment. (The clue, of course, is in the name - "Commandment" - though this objection doesn't apply to all of them)

Meanwhile, most "formal" behavioural propositions (Laws, mores, religious edicts etc) are pain propositions. That is to say when they are recast for SBE they take the second form: "X reduces pleasure and/or increases or maintains pain. Therefore X is SBE negative"

This should not be surprising. The only legitimate behavioural constraint accepted almost universally is that no individual should cause harm to any other individual. Some qualify that by adding "without provocation" and SBE qualifies it "without tfaic". This has implications for how SBE defines and deals with crime. We'll deal with that later too.

In addition, generally speaking, people don't need to be told what to do in order to pursue pleasure and enjoy themselves; so we don't find many Laws and Edicts instructing people "Do X because it's fun". Indeed, many ethical systems (eg most monotheist sects, Stoicism, Fascism, Maoism and other pseudo-communist and totalitarian systems), actually regard the pursuit of many natural pleasures as "sinful" or at least evidence of "weak morals"; sex being the most obvious example. Indeed they often issue edicts prohibiting various sexual practices on the grounds that they cause harm.

While it is occasionally true that sexual activity can cause unintended harm, the real motives of the lawmakers are exposed when, as well as forbidding the sexual activity, they frequently also forbid the measures which would enable the sex to proceed without the harm. We see this in the Catholic Church's prohibition of condoms, for example, which will prevent, or at least dramatically reduce the risk of, many of the unintended harms caused by sex. So entrenched are Church attitudes that they are prepared to issue brazen [public lies](#) ([local](#)) about scientific evidence which disprove their outlandish claims and support the benefits of condoms. It's as though they haven't yet learned the lessons of the Galileo episode. (Well, it is only a few centuries.)

There are countless other well documented examples of the disgraceful behaviour of the Catholic Church, perhaps the most recent being the [decades of denial and protection of the paedophiles](#) in its midst. I do not intend to dwell on those shortcomings here other than to comment that it is obvious that harm reduction is not their primary concern. They are not unique, however, in conducting their "War on Sex". Just do a google for that phrase and read a few of the pages that come up. Right across the planet, from the totalitarian regimes in China or North Korea, to the heart of Capitalism in the United States of America, the moral guardians of our soul are in battle against the desires of that soul.

Hence, the more positive "enjoy yourself" instructions tend to be limited to commercial manipulation (advertising), psychotherapy and therapy-like "positive thinking" programs, "new age" spiritualism, pagan religions, or "renegade" systems like occult worship, "yoof" culture and so on; though there are two exceptions among the 10 Commandments and, again, we'll be dealing with those later. The importance of the examples in this paragraph is that you will note, with one obvious exception, that none of them have their hands on the "levers of power". The obvious exception is commercial advertising which is closely linked to the pillars of power, but they want you to buy their products, so they've no incentive, in this context, to be negative.

Those who exercise real power in society do so by proscribing and prescribing behaviour. You must not do X. You must do Y. Even in the days of absolute monarchy, it was difficult to justify such authoritarian assertions without some attempt at moral underpinning, so religion has often been co-opted by the State in order to impart the authenticity of the relevant holy utterances to the arbitrary edicts of a ruler. When Church and State disagreed, the State was occasionally happy simply to re-invent the Church.

It is not my intention here to probe the psychological reasons why control freaks are desperate to control us. From where I sit, it seems that the chief fear of a ruling class is that its subjects will learn to think for themselves and thus undermine the weak intellectual basis for their subjugation; then rise up and overthrow the rulers. Freedom of action is dangerous because it leads to freedom of thought - and vice versa (and religious arguments often make that connection quite openly). It is, therefore, imperative to control behaviour, even if arbitrarily, just to ensure that everyone remains aware of who is in charge.

All of which may be why most moral or behavioural propositions are injunctions against causing real or alleged harm through the specific form of behaviour deprecated by the proponent. Whatever the reason for the initial injunction, the examination of whether the alleged harm is real is often either ignored or suppressed, sometimes quite openly (like [Nixon's rejection](#) of his own [Presidential Commission Report](#) on Marijuana)

It is not surprising, therefore, that public life, generally, is dominated by negative rather

than positive behavioural guidance and that rulers are forced to *police* society (to prevent behaviour which they disapprove of, regardless of real harm) at least as much as they try to *protect* it (from genuinely harmful behaviour by antisocial elements).

So What Is This Pain We Wish To Avoid?

In the light of the conclusions above, it is necessary, or at least useful, to define what "harm" or "pain" is relevant, in the context of this analysis. How can SBE help to distinguish valid anti-harm propositions from the control freaks' desperate desire to curtail our freedom of thought and action?

What pain is it that SBE seeks to avoid or minimise? Not all pain, after all, is "bad". The pain of physical exercise, for example, is frequently referred to in the aphorism: "No Pain, No Gain" implying that the gain is worth the pain. The pain enjoyed by masochists during their sexual activity is an obvious example of acceptable pain (acceptable, that is, to autonomists, often unacceptable to control freaks). And many women still choose to experience the avoidable pain of childbirth rather than be anaesthetized.

Consensual Pain is clearly not our target. The short answer is that the pain we're really interested in is the pain that causes real harm.

Given that we arrived at SBE on the basis of the observation that "living" is the process of avoiding pain and/or pursuing pleasure (see [Chapter 6](#)), it should be clear that the relevant pains SBE is concerned with are those which - if not avoided, and not suffered/enjoyed with tfaic - would have the effect of either reducing life expectancy or reducing the quality of life (which ultimately leads to the point where life is no longer considered "worth living".)

However, that last parameter - quality of life - is awkward. It is, necessarily, a purely subjective assessment. Our whole philosophical basis for democracy ([Chapter 7](#)), after all, are the principles we established that:

- 1) in the absence of absolute right or wrong, the only rational way to decide behavioural propositions is to measure the support for the alternative points of view and
- 2) in order to make those measurements and establish the opinions and wishes of "We The People" we need to ask every one of those affected by a given issue to make their own private decision - because nobody else is or can ever be in a position to judge what YOU believe makes your life - or anyone else's - worth living.

But, being subjective, we can't easily discount "spurious" pains. Pains, for example, where the victim is a volunteer - which means they have given tfaic - and yet still choose to complain about the avoidable pain.

If you warn your child that they won't like the hot curry but they insist on having it anyway, are you going to be sympathetic when they complain that you've allowed them to have it?

When the case is as clear cut as that then it is, in fact, easy enough to discount the spurious pain. The grey area surrounds the question of "avoidable".

For example, make me watch "Big Brother Live" and it definitely causes me severe psychological pain. Godnose I've tried, but its just a genre I cannot assimilate. If I couldn't escape from it, it would, eventually, have the effect of making me feel that my life was no longer worth living. Fortunately, it's optional. I can escape from it. I can avoid it entirely, so it is not a problem.

Actually it still is. True, I can avoid the experience, but I can't avoid the knowledge that it exists. Not an insignificant point. I can avoid the experience of female circumcision, but I can't avoid the knowledge that it continues to exist and we've already argued in many places that I'm entitled to try to intervene to prevent that practice, regardless of the fact that it doesn't directly affect me, because I am exercising my autonomy to come to the aid of a third party in distress who cannot be credibly shown to have given tfaic.

Now, I obviously can't make an equivalent claim about the screening of Big Brother. Where are the third parties being harmed without their consent?

Can I make any kind of prima facie ethical case against it?

Suppose, for example, I object in principle to such public invasions of privacy in the name of mere entertainment on the grounds that I'm convinced it is part of the New World Order's plan to soften us all up for the real Big Brother - George Orwell style. And, I argue, "It is an offence, particularly in the current political climate, to his memory to trivialise the issue of the Police State!"

Does this give me the right to propose the prohibition of "reality tv" on the basis that it causes me and thousands of others like me similar "pain"?

Well first I'd have to prove that I do indeed suffer unavoidable pain. Obviously, unless I have advanced telepathic tendencies, I'm not going to be able to demonstrate that I suffer pain anytime people watch the program, even when I don't know that it is being broadcast.

So the mere fact that they're watching isn't really the cause of my alleged pain. It's the fact that the viewers are collaborating with the voluntary invasion of privacy and my fear that this will cheapen the real battle to protect privacy. And given that I can't be claiming "episodic pain" linked to broadcasts, I must be claiming that I'm in a more or less constant state of pain induced by the mere knowledge that this abuse is ever allowed to be broadcast.

I obviously can't make sensible claims about harm to the participants or audience, because they've all given tfaic. So what I'm really saying is that the trivialisation of the issues will cause later social harm by paving the way to a 1984 style Police State

This is analogous to warning someone "Don't go up the mountain, the weather's closing in" which would be perfectly sensible advice. And if we don't trust the source of the advice, we can check a trusted weather forecast.

But if someone argues that doing A will lead to Z and has no evidence (in the form, for instance, of previous examples where such a progression is demonstrable) to support the prediction, and, on the contrary, there is evidence that A has been performed for many years without producing Z, then why should we pay any attention to the prediction?

But suppose A has never been attempted before? There is a sensible compromise. Presumably, if the prediction A produces Z is valid, then other predictions should be possible regarding precursors to Z. For example, it might be inevitable that if A is ever going to produce Z, then it must lead to the lesser problems, G, Q and T first.

The reasonable compromise, therefore, would be to establish an agreed auditing system to monitor for the first signs of G and, if such signs are identified by a trusted system, then the probability of Z and any harm that it might represent can be reviewed in the light of this emerging evidence.

But in the absence of any such evidence regarding G, Q, T or Z, however convinced the proponents may be, they have no case for prohibition of A. They can only legitimately urge caution.

So, however strong my fears about the rise of a totalitarian Police State may be, unless I can demonstrate an empirical or logical link between the screening of the virtual "Big Brother" and the sequence of events which could lead to the real thing, I cannot justify my proposed prohibition of that nasty little program. Dammit!

It doesn't take much imagination to apply that logic to, for example, "[Jerry Springer - The Opera](#)"

For a start its controversial content was highly publicised. So no-one could argue that they paid for a ticket without tfaic. It was subsequently broadcast, with multiple warnings, on BBC TV. Again nobody who watched it can argue that they were forced to watch it (at least, not by the broadcasters!). So where's the beef?

Well the process of "highly publicising" was itself the source of "offence". True, on the one hand, the potential audiences had to be warned that the content might be offensive, but, on the other, making public the reasons why the content might give offence was itself enough to give offence to those least likely to become audience members.

Again, this is not, in itself, an unreasonable position. If, for example, [MIFT](#) announce that they have kidnapped the current Iraqi cabinet and are going to execute them one by one and the BBC announces that it is going to broadcast the footage, I would not wish to watch and I would strongly object to the broadcast. Not on the basis that "we shouldn't be allowed to watch" but rather on the basis that such a broadcast aids the commission of unambiguous extreme harm.

My pain proposition is clear. The broadcast of such activity by a reputable broadcaster lends support to the commission of murder and makes future similar murder more likely. I'm sure most readers would agree.

The point is that we can't draw the facile conclusion that objecting to something we don't even intend to watch is inherently invalid.

However, the pain proposition from the opponents of "Jerry" is somewhat confused:

This:

"What kind of Christians [this refers the participation of Christian David Soul in the lead role] are the sort of people who find mocking God and Jesus Christ acceptable? ...If this show portrayed Mohammed or Vishnu as homosexual, ridiculous and ineffectual, it would never have seen the light of day."

sums up and is a fairly [typical example](#) of the protest.

It actually contains two propositions and we'll deal with them separately.

The first suggests that mocking God and Jesus causes harm. To whom or what precisely? Obviously not God, as he is omnipotent and utterly immune from any damage we could cause him. Jesus is, of course, also God, so it can't be him. So they must mean that Christians in general, or perhaps a particular group of Christians will be harmed. But if

nobody is forcing them to watch it, then how are they being harmed?

Are they making the case that their experience of being offended is harmful itself?

That it is painful we cannot dispute. And, yes, SBE advocates avoiding pain as widely as reasonable and possible in the circumstances. Doesn't that mean that we should avoid giving offence wherever possible?

Only if it is also *reasonable*.

No doubt I give offence to the practitioners of female circumcision by advocating that the global community should step in and end this obscene practice. Is the probability of causing that offence sufficient reason to prevent me making that argument? Few will agree with that. Why not? Because the purpose of my offensive argument is obviously to prevent considerably greater pain than any caused by my argument itself. It would, therefore, not be reasonable to suppress my attempt.

Were we to reach any other conclusion, then we would essentially be arguing that no further human debate was possible. I cannot think of any debateable topic on which we could guarantee that no-one anywhere would take offence at one or other sides of the debate.

So we can justify the giving of offence - despite the pain it represents - if the purpose is to avoid a greater pain. Is that what we are doing with "Jerry"?

Well, I've watched it a couple of times and I can't honestly claim that it helps to avoid some notional pain greater than the pain caused by the offence given by awareness, amongst some Christians, that the performance exists. What I can say, though, is that it gave me considerable pleasure.

Can we balance Pain against Pleasure? Of course. We do it all the time. I hate parting with my hard earned cash, but I'll put up with a certain amount of that pain in order to buy a variety of things which will give me some pleasure or pain relief in return. Ask a gardener about how much pain they go through in order to experience their eventual pleasure; or a musician, a writer, an athlete and so on.

But am I entitled to offset my pleasure against someone else's pain? Not, as an individual, without tfaic. That's the basis, for example, of the Eighth Commandment. Ignoring, for the time being, Proudhon's axiom (Property is Theft) "Thou shalt not steal" makes good SBE sense because depriving someone of something they consider they own is a known cause of pain. That could only be justified if the theft averted a greater pain elsewhere.

But the "Jerry" issue is a different ball game. The very fact that I am an atheist preaching against the cause of religion is a source of "pain" to some fundamentalists. The fact that they are fundamentalists preaching their own creed is a source of pain to me. Should either of us be entitled to prevent the other continuing their pain causing behaviour. "Of course not" you may reply, but why not?

The pragmatic answer is obvious. Such strictures would paralyse society. But what is the philosophical objection if any?

There isn't one!

Oh sure, we could do what moral philosophy does all the time and invent a priori rules to account for such gaps, but the plain fact is that there isn't a valid ethical argument for ignoring any given source of pain.

We are left with nothing but the pragmatism. If we don't agree to let each other alone to behave according to our own principles then we are condemned to a state of permanent conflict about virtually everything we do as human beings.

And if we do agree to permit certain categories of pain causing behaviour, then essentially, providing my autonomous behaviour doesn't interfere with your autonomous behaviour, and providing I am not clearly causing harm to a third party without tfaic, then, however reluctant that tolerance may be, it constitutes the free and informed consent which we need to justify any pain causing behaviour.

What it implies is that there is a difference between certain kinds of harm and I don't think it is difficult to see where to draw the line. We stated it earlier. The harm or pain we care about is that which will cause an involuntary reduction in our quality or quantity of life. That still contains the "quality" trap and its subjective difficulties. But if a quality protest is based on behaviour which is avoidable by the protestor, then, under the implied "agreement", all the protestor can reasonably do is avoid the objectionable behaviour. If they choose not to then, like it or not, they are giving tfaic. Of course, if the source of the objectionable behaviour genuinely cannot be avoided, the protestor has a more legitimate complaint, but mere awareness clearly does not constitute "unavoidability".

All of which amounts to a long-winded way of stating common sense.

Forinstance?

If I go to a friend's house and they want to watch "Big Brother", should my pain prevent their pleasure? I am of, course, free to leave the house, or at least the TV room, even if I'm

sacrificing the point of the visit. Alternatively, if a devout Christian comes to my house, while I'm watching "Jerry", am I obliged to switch it off?

If I've invited him or her, then unless it was for the specific purpose of allowing them to view "Jerry" - which would imply tfaic - then I should switch it off and get on with the business I invited them for. I can always watch it later when they've gone. Of course, if I didn't invite them, they can take it or leave!

Well that's dealt with their first proposition! (Mocking God causes harm)

The second proposition "*...If this show portrayed Mohammed or Vishnu as homosexual, ridiculous and ineffectual, it would never have seen the light of day.*"

... contains a much more direct prediction of harm.

To begin with, it is probably completely correct. Why? Because we know that some Muslim fundamentalists are even more balmy and dangerous than most Christian fundamentalists. They have demonstrated that on many occasions, not least their insane reaction to Salman Rushdie's "Satanic Verses". In the light of such behaviour, it would indeed be dangerous to perform such a play in an Islamic context because their community contains people who believe that, when offended, they are justified in bombing the theatre.

So - like I said earlier - there are times when:

It may be wise to follow such instructions for pragmatic reasons - if, for example, the source of the instructions has some means of forcing you to do so or detecting and punishing you if you don't.

But, as I also said at the time,

*... unless the person being instructed has given tfaic (to such instruction), **there is no ethical basis** which either justifies the issue of such instructions or compels obedience to them.*

So yes, Muslims might succeed in blackmailing us not to exercise our autonomy, but that doesn't amount to an ethical victory - rather it is a highly unethical one. Is that the path the Christian fundamentalists want to tread?

They're free to do so, of course. But then we're equally free to start bombing Churches.

The fact that some fanatical imbeciles hiding behind their religion have managed to

intimidate society into treating them with more respect than they deserve presents us with a security problem, not an ethical one. It has become a branch of the "War on Terror".

In short, however intense, mere disapproval of behaviour which you are not compelled to participate in or to witness at first hand is not a qualifying Pain for consideration under SBE unless you can demonstrate harm to third parties without tfaic.

While I was drafting the above, I happened to catch "The Siege of Darley Oaks Farm" (Money Programme BBC2 25/7/05) broadcast. It neatly crystallised the issue of pain caused by theft and how pain can depend on the attitude of the victim

I'll be coming back to it for various reasons elsewhere. The only point I want to touch on now is the desecration of the grave of Grandma Gladys Hammond by the Animal Rights protestors. This fundamentalist attack caused immense and obviously very real distress to the relatives, not to mention considerable anger and distress to the community in general. There is no question that real pain was caused and that this act was unquestionably one which would be condemned by anyone practising SBE.

Yet the pain was not direct or inevitable - in the sense that we can say of rape or physical assault. Common yes, normal even. But not inevitable. It was clearly a purely personal psychological response - mental as opposed to physical pain.

Personally, for example, such an attack would not have had a similar emotional impact on me. You need to understand that I loved my Father as deeply as Gladys Hammond was loved by her family. When he died, he was cremated (we thought it wise to wait) and his ashes were scattered in the grounds of the crematorium. Had he been buried more traditionally, though, and, subsequently, had someone chosen to attack me by digging up his bones, their attack would simply have failed. It just wouldn't have had the intended psychological effect. I'd have felt mild disgust at most. I attach no more importance to his bones than he did. Perhaps that's a typical atheist reaction. I haven't asked around so I don't know.

I don't and couldn't argue, however, that my reaction is ethically superior to Grandma Gladys' family. Most people, I accept, would react more like they did and probably regard my reaction as odd and even slightly "immoral". (People are widely socially conditioned to "honour the dead", so someone who doesn't must be immoral) So, once again, I'm the odd one out. Nevertheless, there is no doubt in my mind:

- that their pain was very real and
- that the terrorists knew that they would cause this pain and
- that this was their primary motive.

In their defence the terrorists would argue that the pain they were deliberately causing was intended to prevent the greater pain of the guinea pigs being bred at Darley Oaks for medical research. I have discussed my own feelings in regard to the use of animals for such purposes within the "[Thou Shalt Not Kill](#)" section in Chapter 10-2. Guinea pigs fall below my cutoff point - so if I was on the jury, I'd vote to convict.

That, of course, is not a philosophical argument. When it comes to things like the human exploitation of animals, it is not really possible to defend it philosophically, only pragmatically; and, eventually, it won't even be possible to do that. This, therefore, is a classic example of something which can only be settled by a democratic plebiscite. Society has to take collective responsibility for causing pain for our own collective benefit and draw the lines on how far we can allow those working on our behalf to go in that direction.

Equally important, though, is that the desecration illustrates that I'm not suggesting (as my response to religious offence might have implied) that we can simply ignore psychological pain. It can, in extremis, kill just as certainly as physical pain.

The clear difference between the family's psychological pain and the Christians' pain over "Jerry" or the Muslims' pain over "Satanic Verses" is the very real physical attack on what they considered as a form of "property". Grandma's bones have definitely been stolen. That and its consequences present an unavoidable pain to her family. Much more unavoidable than "Jerry" or "Verses". were to the religious objectors.

If someone else is behaving in ways you dislike or disapprove, then unless they're causing you or a third party harm - without tfaic - or you can't avoid the behaviour (like noisy neighbours) - then there is a point at which we simply have to agree, for pragmatic rather than philosophical reasons, to Live and Let Live.

As usual, this conclusion isn't revolutionary and it bears the imprint of common sense. Keep to your side of the fence and practise your own rituals. Don't drag me into them and don't try to affect my life with the detritus of your world view. I, in turn, will tolerate your existence as well and undertake not to undermine your lifestyle. That's fair, that's reciprocity. Do as you would be done by. The Golden Rule.

But it has profound implications in this context. It means we can now distinguish good law from bad and we finally have a reasonably objective basis on which to define a philosophically consistent ethical code. Perhaps the first ever philosophically consistent ethical code.

Lets test it with the Ten Commandments.

1 THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME.

This is obviously an instruction - a literal commandment - rather than a behavioural proposition. Why? Because there is no attempt at either a pain or pleasure proposition. It is not even possible to create a rational pleasure proposition from the instruction and if we attempt to construct a pain proposition, the best we can do is assume that either it means:

Don't worship other Gods because it hurts me.

or

Don't worship other Gods because, if you do, I'll hurt you.

We'll reject the second because it's a straightforward threat. There is nothing ethical about that. It would be pure egoism. For the time being, we'll give the Superbeing the benefit of the ethical doubt.

Which leaves us with the argument that human worship of other Gods hurts this one.

For reasons unconnected with ethics, it is ludicrous to suggest that anything we could do could actually cause real harm to a superbeing capable of creating this universe. But we'll leave that to one side and take his "request" at face value. Presumably the pain we cause by worshipping other Gods is similar to the pain of disapproval experienced by Islamic Fundamentalists who dislike the Satanic Verses. If so the relevant question is how "avoidable" is the forbidden praying.

An omniscient being is, of course, *able* to see what is going on everywhere all the time. What we don't know, and the bible remains silent on, is whether this particular omniscient being is *compelled* to see it all. If so, however, that would constitute a significant weakness in a being who is also alleged to be omnipotent. Again, there are two possibilities:

Either disapproved praying is avoidable and any resulting pain can be avoided which would mean that the behaviour is not SBE negative; It might even be beneficial - SBE positive - if the other Gods being prayed to are more attentive and more responsive to the penitent's prayers.

Alternatively, their God is not omnipotent. If so, and it really does suffer pain as a result of human worship of other Gods, then it would need to present at least an argument for why such behaviour caused pain. Jealousy certainly doesn't provide ethical grounds for feeling pain and, in the absence of any other argument there is no obvious satisfactory reason to accept the pain as relevant for SBE.

Strike 1. The first commandment fails the SBE test.

2 THOU SHALT NOT MAKE UNTO THEE ANY GRAVEN IMAGE, OR ANY LIKENESS OF ANY THING THAT IS IN HEAVEN ABOVE, OR THAT IS IN THE EARTH BENEATH, OR THAT IS IN THE WATER UNDER THE EARTH:

and

THOU SHALT NOT BOW DOWN THYSELF TO THEM, NOR SERVE THEM: FOR I THE LORD THY GOD AM A JEALOUS GOD, VISITING THE INIQUITY OF THE FATHERS UPON THE CHILDREN UNTO THE THIRD AND FOURTH GENERATION OF THEM THAT HATE ME

Oh boy!

Right then, where is the pain proposition?

Clearly this commandment is closely associated with the first and casts doubt upon our earlier charity (in assuming that the first commandment wasn't just an ego trip). Here their God is apparently making a quite explicit threat of the kind we postulated and charitably rejected in regard to the first commandment

Nor is there any other obvious possible reason for the prohibition. The pain proposition is simple and similar to the first.

"Making graven images, or bowing down before them causes me pain and, if you do it, I'll make sure I don't just hurt you in return, I'll carry on punishing your families for up to 4 generations"

The same avoidability arguments we used above apply. This commandment is unequivocally SBE negative and constitutes overt bullying.

Strike Two.

3 THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD THY GOD IN VAIN

At first glance, this appears to be more of the same. Egotistical bullying nonsense. But we're trying to be charitable. Suppose that we view God as a "help desk". Calling him up other than when necessary might dilute his attention from problems that really need solving. Such unnecessary calls are a waste of his "bandwidth". Of course, the omnipotence attribute rears its head at this point, because if he was truly omnipotent, bandwidth wouldn't be limited.

It is possible, even probable, therefore, that this commandment is unethical for the same

reasons as 1 & 2. But it is also just barely possible that it is a practical requirement. We'll stay neutral on 3.

4 REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY, TO KEEP IT HOLY.

SIX DAYS SHALT THOU LABOUR, AND DO ALL THY WORK:

BUT THE SEVENTH DAY IS THE SABBATH OF THE LORD THY GOD: IN IT THOU SHALT NOT DO ANY WORK, THOU, NOR THY SON, NOR THY DAUGHTER, THY MANSERVANT, NOR THY MAIDSERVANT, NOR THY CATTLE, NOR THY STRANGER THAT IS WITHIN THY GATES:

Again, this one can be construed in two ways. First as a egotistical demand requiring his subjects to spend all day worshipping their creator. This would be unethical as above. However, I'm inclined to view this command as the first ever victory for the working classes! The instruction could equally be construed as "Chill out, take some time off. It'll do you good." rather than "spend at least one day a week worshipping me".

I would argue that this is the first of the exceptions I mentioned above. This isn't a pain proposition at all. It's a pleasure proposition. Take the day off. Relax. Enjoy. One might argue that, today, the insistence on the day off being "the sabbath" is an unnecessary restriction, but in the context of its time, it represents a significant breakthrough, perhaps the first historical reference to leisure time - which we all recognise, today, as being at least as valuable as good quality productivity.

I'm giving that one the thumbs up. That's one up for God. So, after four commandments, he's 2:1 down with one score draw.

5 HONOUR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER

And this is the second exception. No ambiguity in this one. This can't benefit his own ego, so the motivation here to bring pleasure to your own parents. Whether they deserve it unconditionally is a moot point in many cases, but, in general, it is a reasonable exhortation to unselfish behaviour.

And suddenly, he's back in the game! We're all square at 2:2

6 THOU SHALT NOT KILL

The pain proposition is obvious. This is the easiest commandment to endorse. The complications (which don't affect our endorsement) are [covered](#) in considerably more detail in the body of Chapter Ten (part 2).

God takes the lead by 3:2!

7 THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY

The pain proposition here: Sex outside marriage will hurt the other marriage partner

This is clearly true in most cases. But it is also redundant, in the sense that the more general instruction "Don't hurt your marriage partner" (or anyone else come to that) covers all causes of pain, including adultery. It is also somewhat more flexible because it allows for the possibility that the third party sex might not be painful for the marriage partner. Indeed they might have their own third party arrangements which are approved by their spouse. "Wife swapping" parties are not unethical providing all participants have given tfaic.

With that proviso, however, and given that wife swapping wasn't a serious option in Moses' day, it is not unreasonable to have a working assumption that adultery will, in most cases, not feature faic for all affected parties and thus will tend to cause pain.

God moves into a strong 4:2 lead with only 3 to play.

8 THOU SHALT NOT STEAL

As we mentioned above, this one is uncontroversial (unless you are take a fundamentalist Proudhon line) and it "makes good SBE sense because depriving someone of something they consider they own is a known cause of pain."

God is now assured of an overall victory. The score is 5:2 with only 2 to play.

9 THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST THY NEIGHBOUR

Again, relatively straightforward. No mixed motives. Can't think of a situation (other than a highly artificial one where incriminating one's neighbour is justified because it prevents a worse pain elsewhere) where it could be regarded as reasonable to perjure yourself to the detriment of your neighbour. It's not just good ethical advice, its good practical advice (you have to live with your neighbours, so it pays to be on good terms with them as far as humanly possible).

6:2 to God.

Finally

10 THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOUR'S HOUSE, THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOUR'S WIFE, NOR HIS MANSERVANT, NOR HIS MAIDSERVANT, NOR HIS OX, NOR HIS ASS, NOR ANY THING THAT IS THY NEIGHBOUR'S

The SBE analysis of this one rather depends on the meaning of the word "Covet". If it simply means "admire", it is difficult to see a problem. If, on the other hand, it means "wish to own" then it's akin to "Thou Shalt Not Steal" (it's equivalent to wanting to steal). The confusion is not helped by the standard translation for covet being "desire" which is itself ambiguous. No man will complain if other men find his wife (or other "property") "desirable". Vice versa for the women and their husbands. Nor will that state cause pain.

To acknowledge that a person or object is "worthy of desire" is surely flattering. Only the attempt to act on that desire is potentially painful and is already outlawed by commandments 7 and 8.

Indeed, on its own, the commandment appears to be defining a "thought crime" which, provided it remains purely in one's thoughts, cannot cause legitimate pain. (the potentially offended party can easily avoid the other one's thoughts!)

Hence, at worst it is trying to define a thought crime with no relevant pain, and at best it describes offences which are covered by other commandments.

We'll stay neutral on that one.

So the overall result is that God wins hands down with 6 decisions in favour of the Mosaic commandments, 2 against and 2 draws.

Wasn't that fun?

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