Alfred Cyril Ewing (1899-1973)

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See also EGGWORTH, FRANCIS YOPEK; MOORE, GEORGE EDWARD; POPULATION; SPENCER, HERBERT.

EVOLUTIONARY UTILITARIANS
See RITCHIE, DAVID GEORGE.

EWING, ALFRED CYRIL (1899-1973)

Alfred Cyril Ewing was born on 11 May 1899 and educated at University College, Oxford. He taught for 4 years at the University of Wales in Swansea, before becoming a lecturer in Moral Science at Cambridge in 1931 and a reader in 1934. He also taught for a time in the United States at Princeton, Northwestern, Southern California, Delaware, and San Francisco State College. Ewing was a prolific writer, a critic of Wittgenstein and a supporter of Karl Popper. He produced several substantial books on ethics, including his major work, Idealism (1934). His ethical position was a compromise between Moore and the deontologists. He defined the good as that which it was fitting to approve. Ewing's conception of goodness, and his classical persuasions, made him a critic of utilitarianism, which he first addressed in The Morality of Punishment (1929), written when he was a graduate student, and later in The Definition of Goodness (1947) and Ethics (1953). His main argument was that utilitarianism cannot meaningfully defend a concept of duty. This is because the utilitarian concept of goodness precludes the derivation of an "ought" judgment. Ewing believed that his own understanding of goodness avoids this weakness. Something is good if it "ought to be the object of a favourable attitude," the kind of attitude directly correlative to the kind of good (Ewing, pp. 345-7).

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See also INTUITIONISM.

EXPECTABILIST UTILITARIANISM

Expectabilist Utilitarianism (EU) is a version of utilitarianism inspired by decision theory (Jackson, 1991). It weighs the possible outcomes of an action against their probabilities of obtaining, given that the action is performed. The following illustrates the potential of the theory to inform decisions.

An agent at any one time will have a set of options open to her; to buy a lottery ticket, to send the money to Oxfam instead, or any number of other optional purchases. Each option has its own set of outcomes—what would happen if she bought the lottery ticket, what Oxfam would do with her donation, and so on. What is the right thing for her to do? Classical Utilitarianism offers a simple answer. She ought to do whatever has the best consequences; what is right is to adopt the option that has the outcome with the highest value. However, it is hardly ever the case that agents can be certain of the consequences of the various options open to them. In real life, agents do not know what would happen were they to adopt one or another course of action. They need to pay attention not just to the values of the possible outcomes, but also to the probability that those outcomes will occur. Writers on ethics often simplify by supposing that agents know for certain what would follow from the choice of each action available to them. But that leaves us with an important question: What happens when we remove this certainty?

The obvious response is to distinguish what is objectively right from what is subjectively right. What is objectively right (according to the utilitarian way of thinking) is to maximize good outcomes, to do that which in fact has the best outcomes. What is subjectively right is to maximize in the light of the probabilities and, moreover, it is what is subjectively right that tells us what we should do in the various situations in which we find ourselves.

It is, however, vital that maximizing in the light of the probabilities be understood in the right way. Here is an example to make the point. A bomb is set to go off in 5 minutes time. There is a control panel that allows Fred to punch in one of a thousand numbers, 1-1,000. He knows that one number alone defuses the bomb; any other number will cause it to explode immediately, killing many people in the building. He has no way of knowing which is the "good" number. Fred's options are punch in 1, punch in 2, ... punch in 1,000, or evacuate the building. What ought Fred to do? What he objectively ought to do is punch in the good number. But what should he do given the fact that he has no idea which number is the good number? Obviously, he should evacuate the building. If he does that, no one will die (we may suppose, although the building will suffer extensive damage). Is evacuating the building subjectively right? It depends on how we specify what is subjectively right.

If we specify that what is subjectively right is the action that is most likely to be objectively right, the answer is no. Reassuring the building is the one action that has no chance of being objectively right. It is certain that, for some number N, punching in N is objectively right. However, if we specify what is subjectively right as the action with the highest expected value—where expected value is obtained by multiplying values of outcomes by their probabilities of occurring—evacuating the building is the subjectively right thing for Fred to do. This is because, for each N, punching that number in is 99.9 percent likely to cause many to die, whereas evacuating the building has almost no chance of causing death.

EU generalizes the moral of the example. If the options for an agent are A₁, A₂, ... Aₙ, and if V is a utility value function defined over outcomes O₁, ..., Oₙ, then the agent's probabilistic maximization, EU says the agent ought to maximize \( E[U(O_i)] \), where \( U(O_i) \) is the agent's probability of achieving \( i \) or the expected utility of the agent's probabilistic maximization, EU says the agent ought to do the action that maximizes \( E[U(O_i)] \). This is what an agent ought to do given the probabilities of the outcomes at the time of making the decision. Moreover, as ethics is concerned most intimately with decisions, this is the central notion for utilitarianism, not what an agent objectively ought to do.