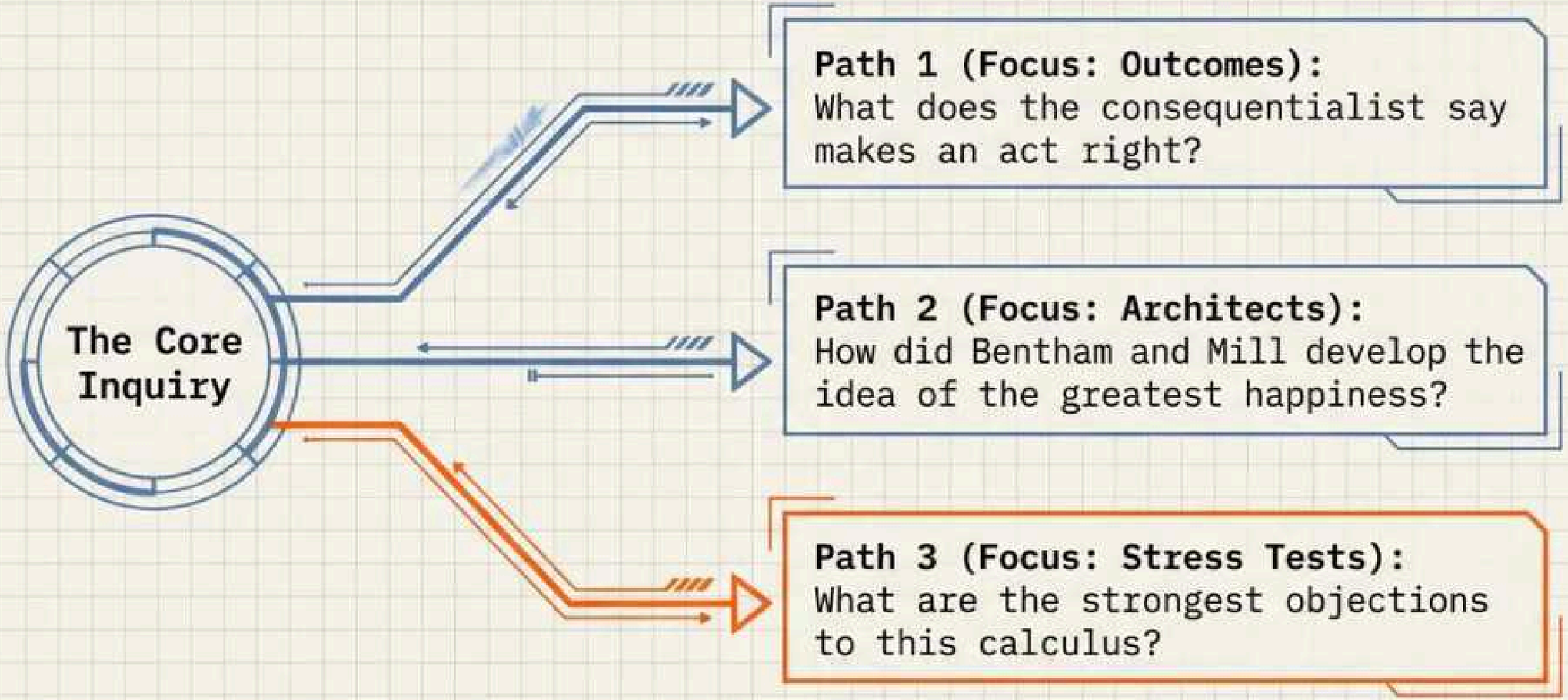
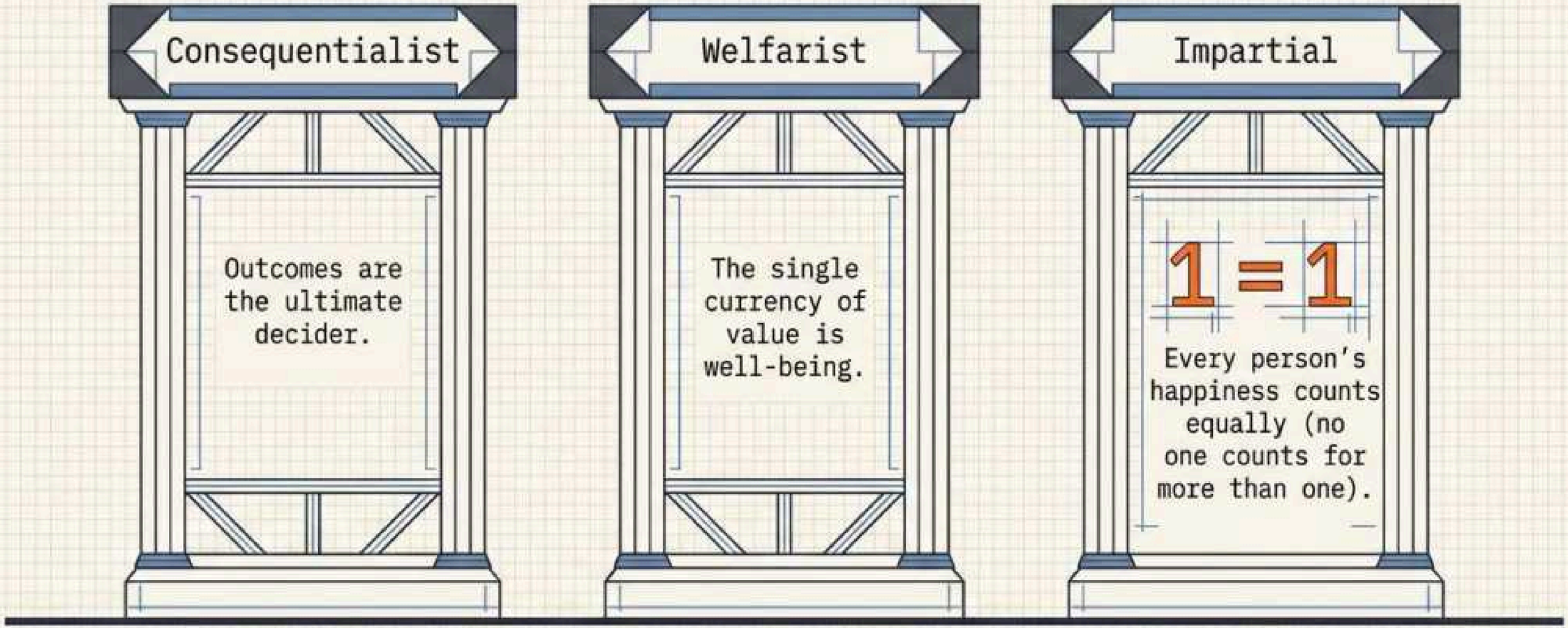
2.1 | The Ethics of Outcomes



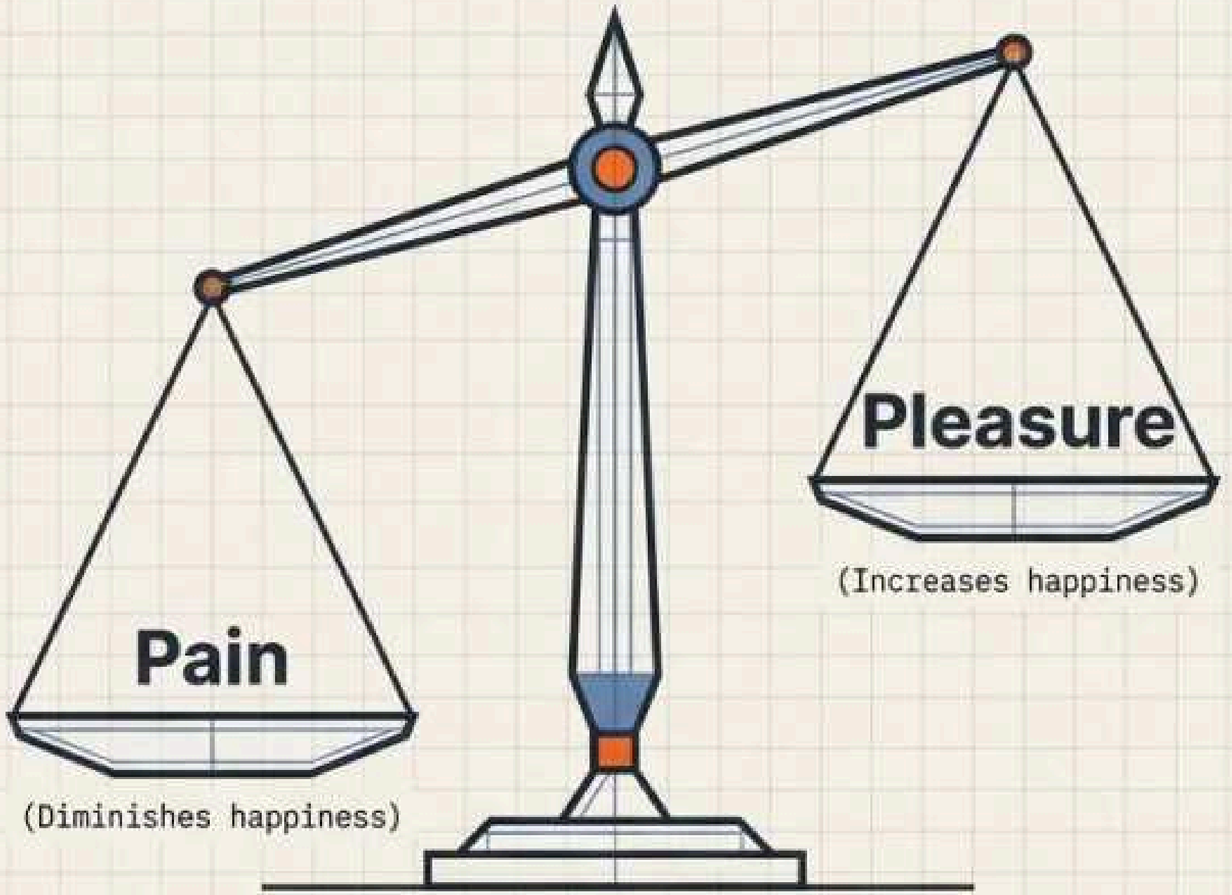
Consequentialism: A family of theories where the rightness of acts depends entirely on their outcomes. Utilitarianism is its most famous member.

2.2 | The Core Idea: Maximizing the Good

Act so as to bring about the best outcome (the greatest total happiness).



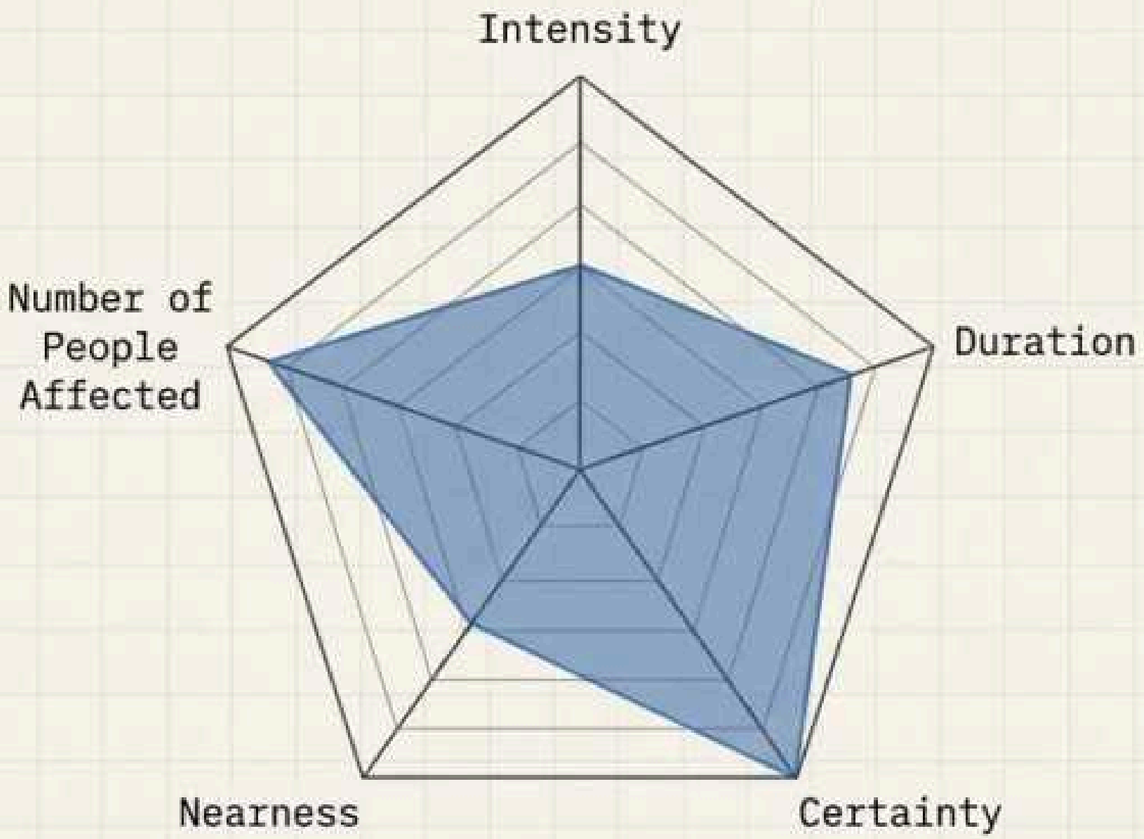
2.3 | Jeremy Bentham & The Two Masters (1789)



Nature has placed humanity under the governance of two sovereign masters. The Principle of Utility approves of an action strictly according to whether it increases or diminishes the happiness of those affected.

Context: Bentham radically applied this calculus in his time to laws, prisons, and the reform of institutions.

2.4 | The Felicific Calculus



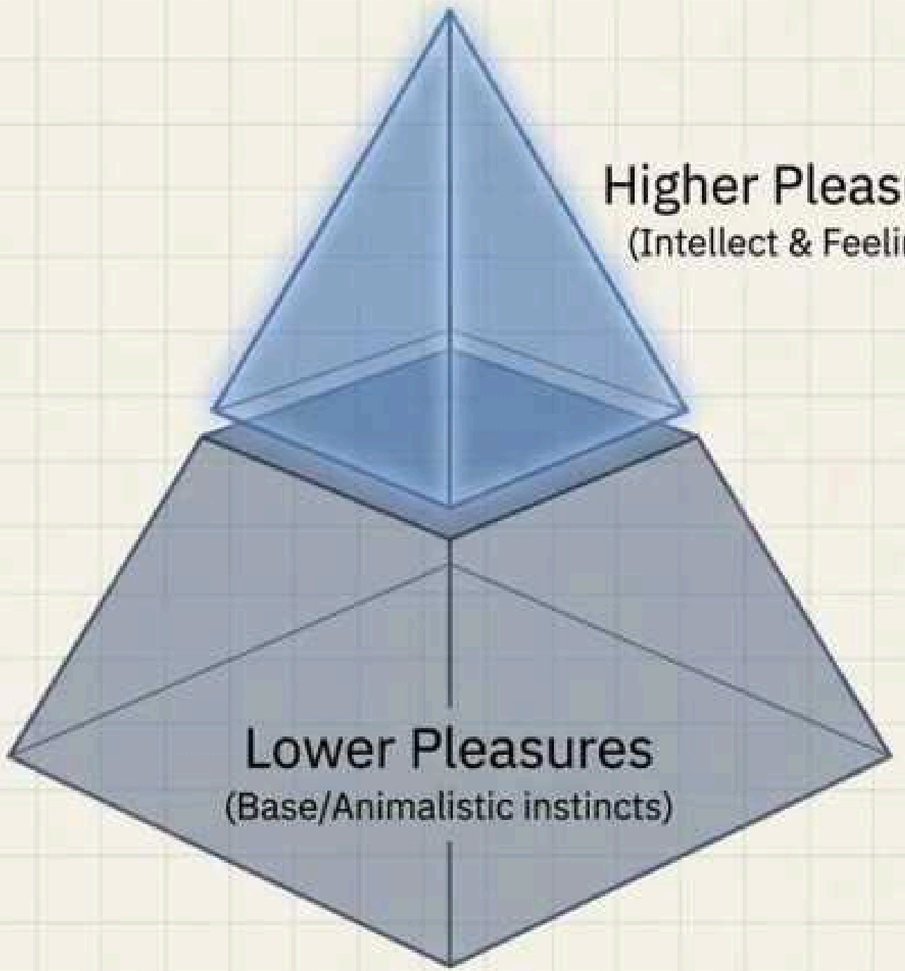
The Aim:

Not perfection, but to make moral reasoning public and checkable, stripping away private taste in favor of objective calculation.

The Animal Question:

The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?

2.5 | John Stuart Mill: Quality Over Quantity (1861)

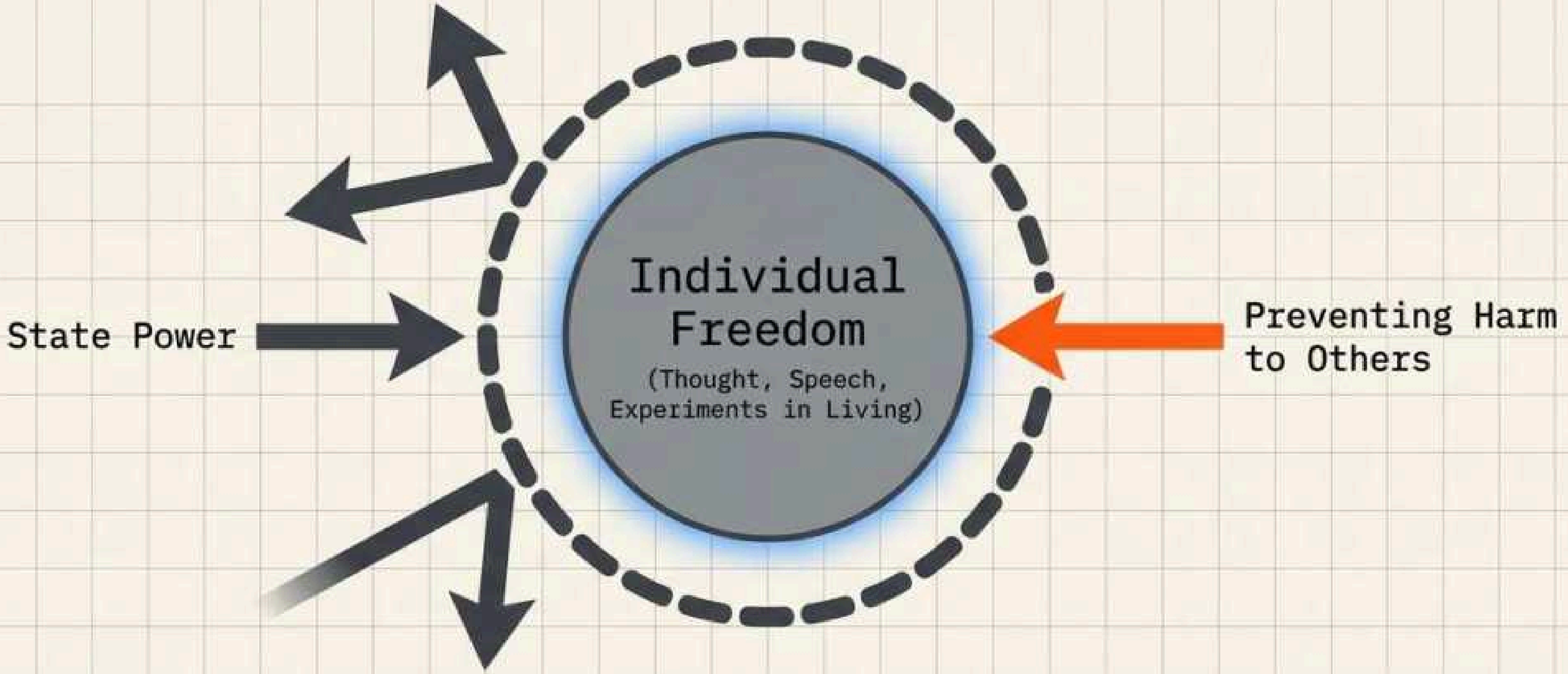


> “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

Note:

Competent judges—those who know both types of pleasure—will always prefer the higher. The liverame to my critical question. (Critics ask: how are these judges chosen?)

2.6 | The Harm Principle & Liberty (1859)



Takeaway: Mill defended liberty on strictly utilitarian grounds—arguing that freedom produces vastly more total happiness in the long run than control ever could.

2.7 | The Great Divide: Act vs. Rule

Act Utilitarianism

Judge each specific act entirely by its own unique consequences.

The Critique:

Can lead to shocking, counterintuitive verdicts in extreme scenarios.

Rule Utilitarianism

Follow rules whose general acceptance produces the best results.

The Critique:

Act utilitarians dismiss this as “rule worship”—following a rule even when breaking it would clearly do more good.

2.8 | Currencies of Well-Being



Hedonists

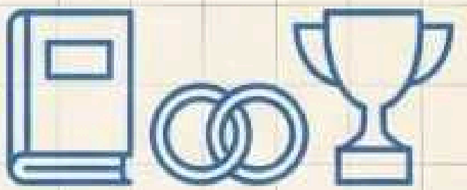
Currency = Pleasure and the absence of pain.



Preference Utilitarians

(e.g., Peter Singer, 1979)

Currency = The satisfaction of individual preferences.



Objective List Theorists

Currency = Universal goods (Knowledge, Friendship, Achievement).

Why the currency matters: The definition chosen dictates how the theory handles people whose preferences are mistaken, harmful, or manipulated.

Q1

Explains Suffering

Gives a clear, biological reason why pain matters.

Q2

Strict Impartiality

Drives historic moral reforms, from the abolition of cruel punishment to the protection of animals.

Q3

Policy Framework

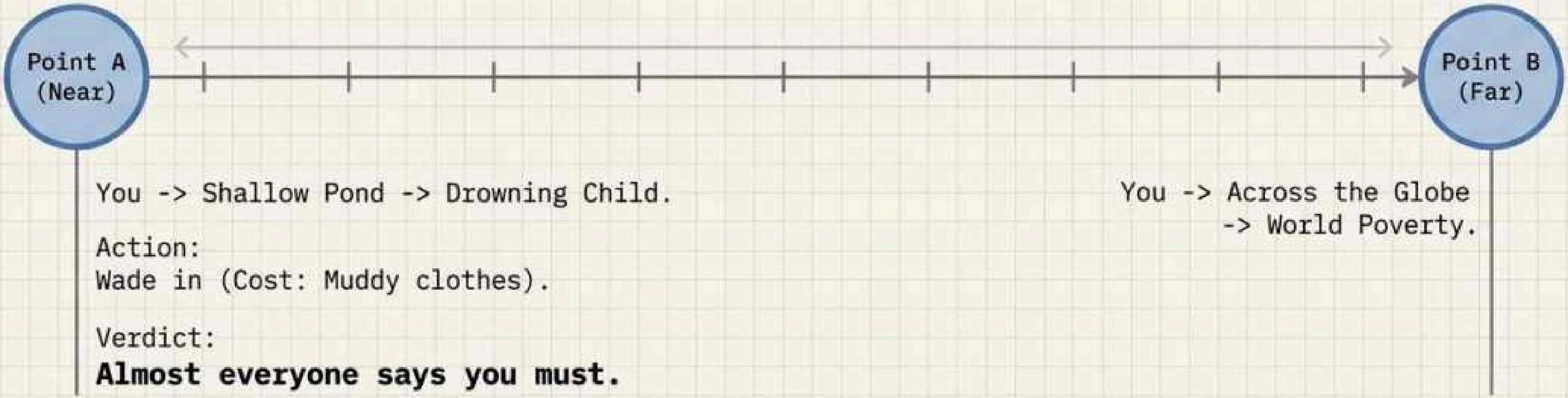
Provides a mathematical method for hard choices (e.g., how to allocate scarce medicine).

Q4

Emergency Flexibility

Explains exactly why rules should sometimes be broken when doing so clearly yields a better outcome.

2.10 | Singer’s Drowning Child (1972)

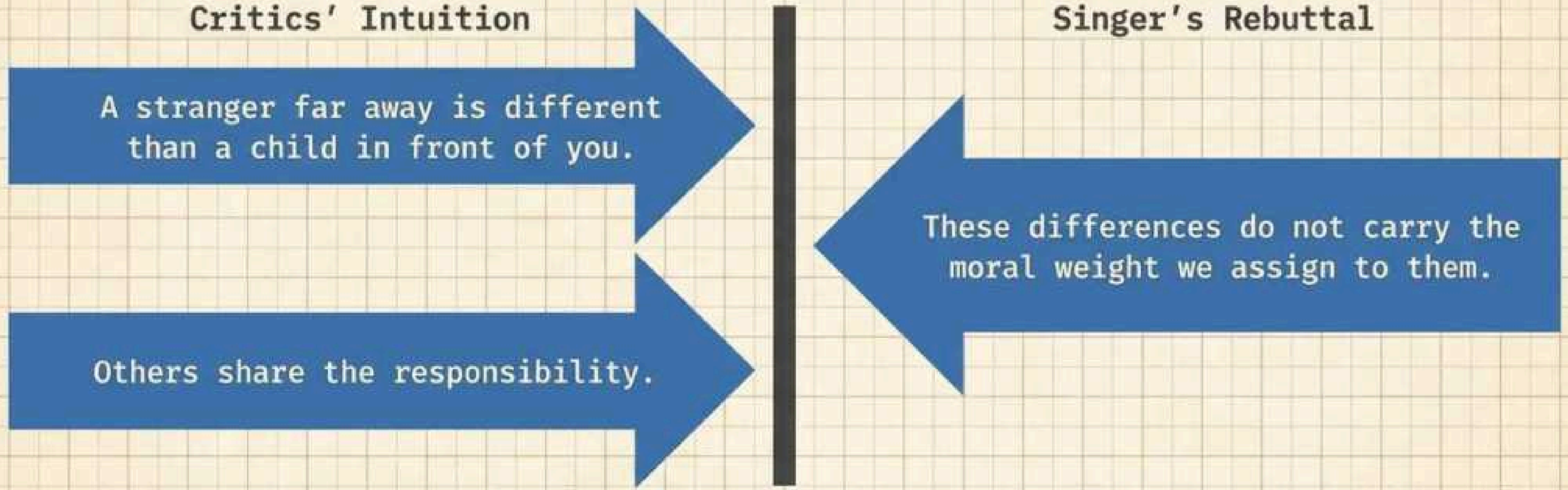


Singer’s Logic:

Distance is morally irrelevant. If we can prevent great suffering at a small cost, we ought to do so.

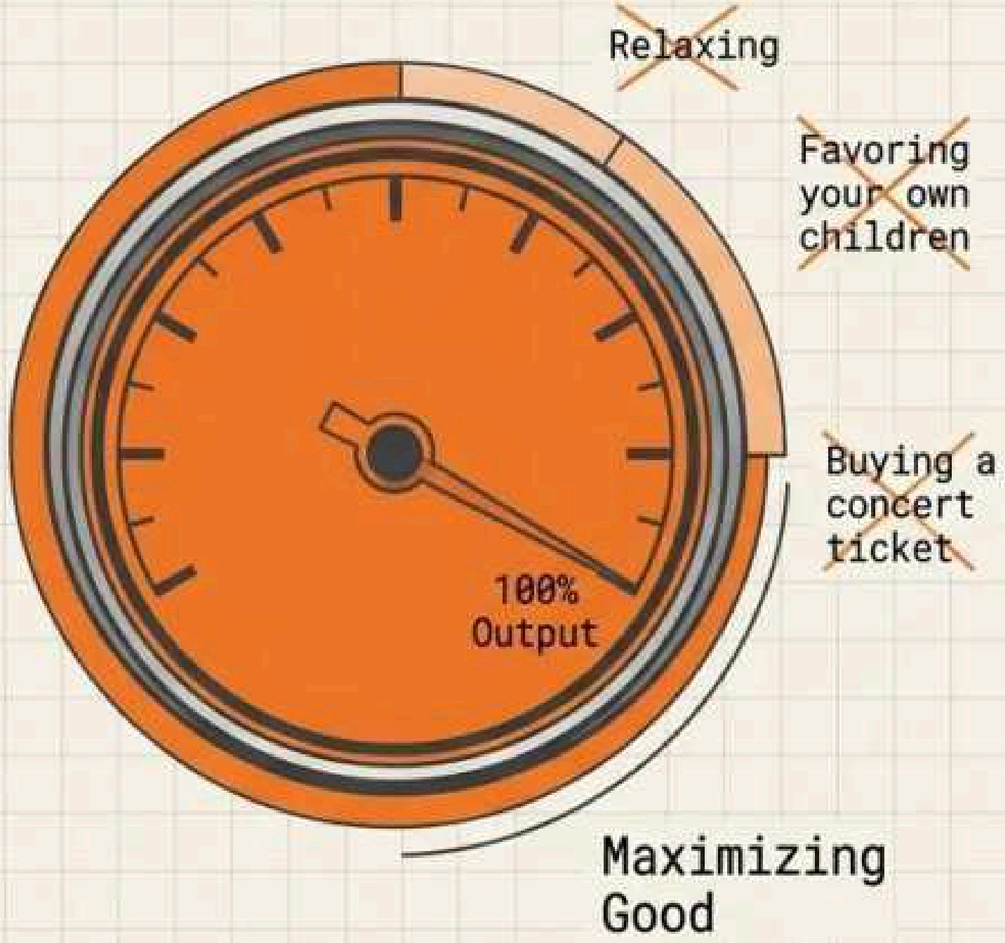
2.11 | The Resistance to Singer

Force-Field Analysis



Conclusion: A mathematically simple principle can generate massive, unyielding demands that reach deep into the minutiae of daily life.

2.12 | The Demandingness Objection



If we must always maximize the good, almost everything we do is wrong whenever another act would do more good.

Defenders: Morality is inherently demanding, or practical forms of the theory allow limits.

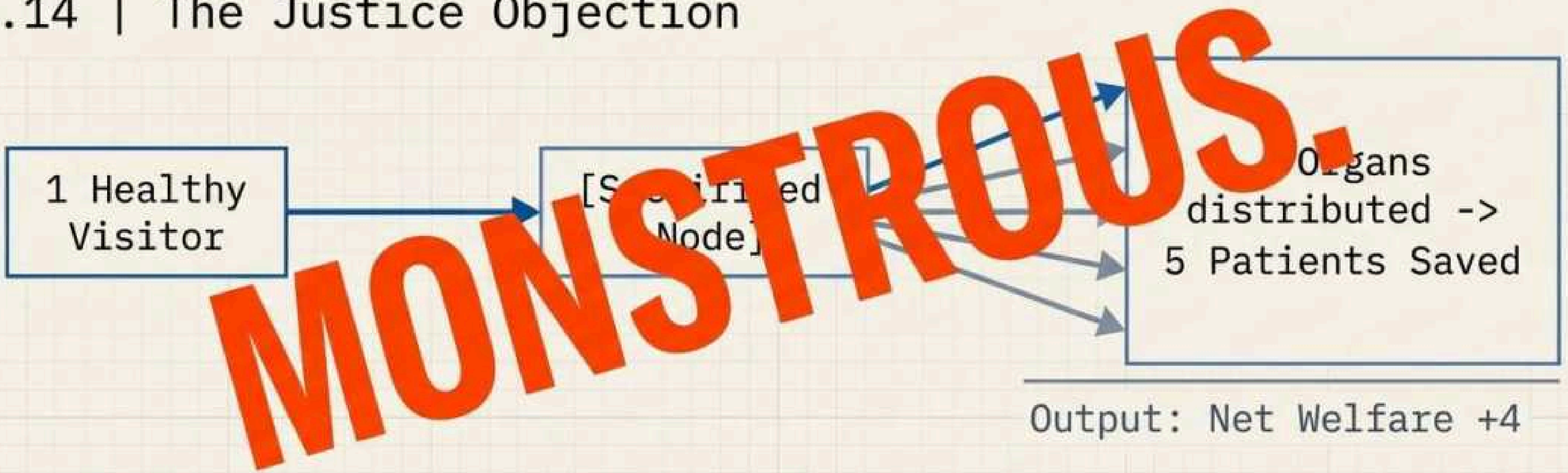
Critics: This fundamentally misunderstands the nature of human morality by leaving no room for a personal life.

2.13 | Bernard Williams & The Problem of Integrity (1973)



> **Williams' Critique:** This arithmetic ignores Integrity. Our own projects, commitments, and morals are what give us reasons to live. Humans are not mere, empty conduits for utility generation.

2.14 | The Justice Objection

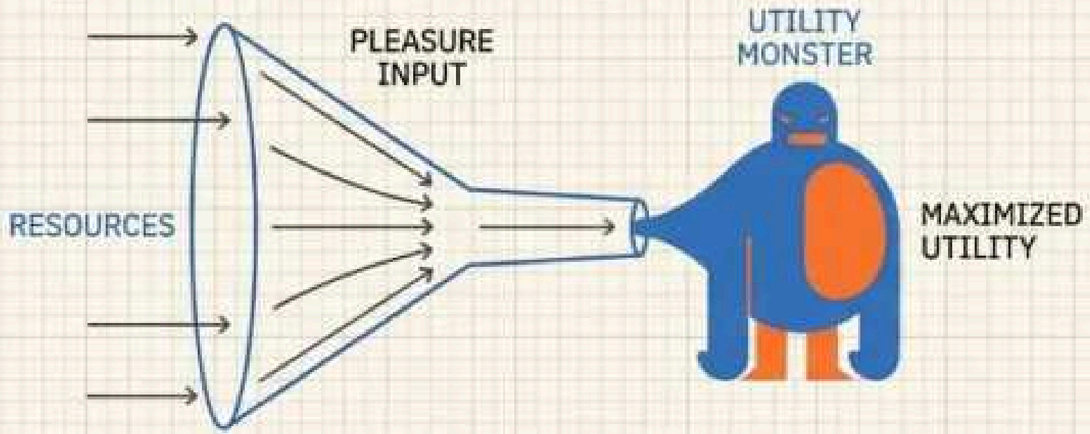


The Clash:

Utilitarian Defense:	In the real world, this destroys trust in hospitals, which would plummet total welfare. Therefore, rules against it maximize the good.
Critic’s Reply:	That gets the right answer for the wrong reason. It shouldn’t be about trust; it should be about fundamental human rights.

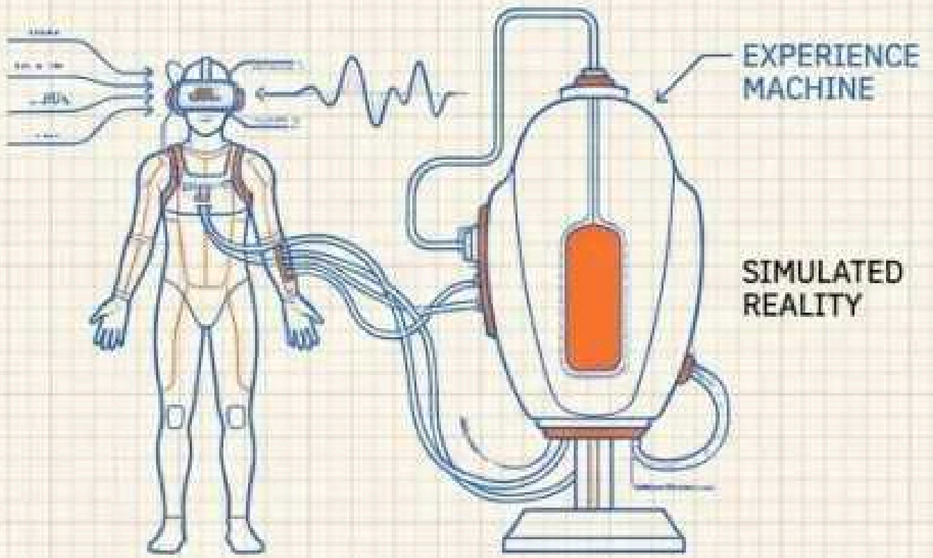
2.15 | Nozick's Monsters and Machines (1974)

The Utility Monster



An entity gaining such enormous pleasure from resources that the math demands we give it absolutely everything to maximize the sum.

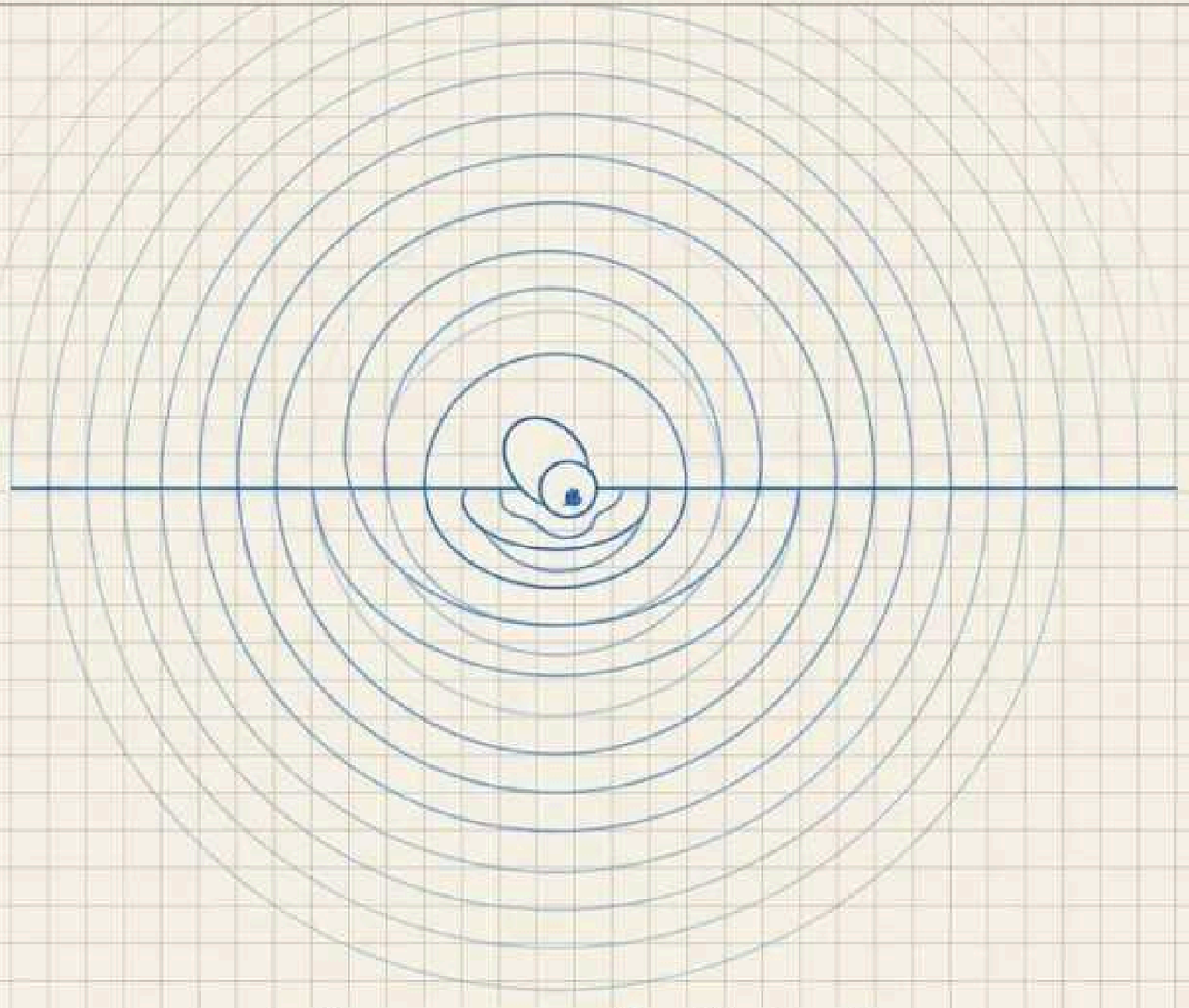
The Experience Machine



A device offering a lifetime of perfect, simulated pleasure.

Most people refuse to plug in. This suggests we value more than just experiences; we want to actually do things and be in touch with reality.

2.16 | The Problem of Uncertainty



(Consequences ramify without end)

The Dual Framework

How do we act if we cannot know the future? Utilitarians divide the system:

- Standard of Right: Actual or expected good.
- Decision Procedure: Simple rules and human habits.

Mill's Metaphor:

Rely on secondary principles drawn from experience—like a navigator using an almanac, rather than calculating the stars anew on every single voyage.

2.17 | Modern Forms & Effective Altruism



Modern Expansions:

- Adding moral status for animals.
- Weighing future generations.
- Giving extra weight to the worst-off.

The Debate (Effective Altruism):

Applying consequentialist math to charity.

Critics say it neglects justice and local ties.

Defenders point to the undeniable real-world results.

2.18 | Exercise: Your Moral Ledger

The Decision: (e.g., spending a free afternoon or a small sum of money) _____
People Affected & How: _____
Estimated Benefits/Harms:  _____

Does your calculation leave something out that troubles you? A promise? A question of fairness?

If so, you have met the limits of consequentialism—which is exactly where our next lecture begins.