

UTILITARIAN ETHICS

“ASK YOURSELF WHETHER YOU ARE HAPPY,
AND YOU CEASE TO BE SO.”

– John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

[46] THE GREATEST HAPPINESS PRINCIPLE

Suppose you're visiting a friend at his cabin retreat up in the mountains. It's January, with lots of snow on the ground, and you have an hour to yourself while your friend buys supplies in town some twenty miles down the valley. The snow is blowing hard enough to keep you inside, and there's not much to do there – no TV, no internet, the hot tub's out of order, and all the books are written in either Greek or Sanskrit. But you do notice a couple of CD's lying by the CD player. You walk over to glance at the titles: one is a Barry Manilow album, the other is Shostakovich's 3rd Symphony. Barry Manilow is one of your favorite recording artists, while you despise Shostakovich as a noisy and disoriented Russian composer. You would rather poke out your eyes with a sharp stick than listen to an hour of Shostakovich. So: Which should you play?

Is there even a question to be asked here? Isn't it obvious that you ought to listen to Barry Manilow? That is what will give you the most pleasure, and so that's who you should play. And if in the end you decide to play the Shostakovich instead, it will be in pursuit of yet some other pleasure: Perhaps you are impressed that your friend – whose musical taste you deeply respect – has this particular CD; or you might want to be able to discuss the music with your friend when he returns; and so on. But in each of these cases, it is apparent that you will do whatever you think will maximize your happiness (at least in the short term, preferably in the long term).

Utilitarianism is no different from this kind of reasoning, except that it adds **impartiality**, claiming that your happiness is of no greater or lesser importance than the happiness of anyone else. So utilitarianism, we might say as a first approximation, is no different from simple prudential reasoning, altered by the impartiality principle.¹

Allocating Scarce Resources

A common example of utilitarianism in action is where some third party needs to allocate scarce resources among a group of individuals, none of whom have a special claim to that resource. How should it be divided? The rule nearly always followed is the utilitarian principle of maximizing the overall happiness. Take kidneys, for example. Most of us are born with two, but sometimes we need a replacement, and life on a hemodialysis machine lasts only so long. Since the first kidney transplant in 1954, over 100,000 have been performed, with a current success rate of 93 percent (in comparison, there have been about 6,000 liver transplants with a success rate of 75 percent, and 8,000 heart transplants with a success rate of 82 percent).

Kidneys for transplantation come either from the recently deceased or from living donors. You need only one kidney to lead a healthy life, and so people are allowed to give (and in some countries, to sell) one of their kidneys. Even still, there are not nearly enough kidneys to meet the demand. At any given time in the United States, 36,000

¹ Impartiality comes in many varieties. I might adopt an attitude of impartiality towards myself and my best friend, or towards all of my friends (while privileging myself above them all), or towards myself and my family, or all my neighbors, and so on. Utilitarianism requires that this impartiality extend to all sentient creation.

people are in need of a kidney, with only 10,000 available.² Given the limited resources, how does the medical community (or we as the larger society) decide how to parcel out those kidneys? This allocation effectively decides who lives and who dies. Should they be distributed on a “first come, first serve” basis? (But what if the person at the top of the list is 95 years old with a failing heart and Alzheimer’s, and the person at the bottom of the list is an otherwise healthy five year old?) Does it matter if the recipient has to care for dependents at home? Does it matter if the recipient is popular or well liked in the community? Devising a good allocation scheme is far from easy, but one principle that nearly always finds its way into such a scheme is the utilitarian principle: Everything else being equal, allocate the kidneys in such a way as to maximize overall well-being. Put them where they will bring about the most good. This is a principle that makes good sense to many people.

UTILITARIANISM AS EMPIRICAL

Jeremy Bentham viewed moral theory as an empirical project: simply look about you, and see what it is that human beings find good and bad. What you’ll discover, Bentham claims, is that humans desire pleasure and abhor pain. As he wrote in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789):

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.

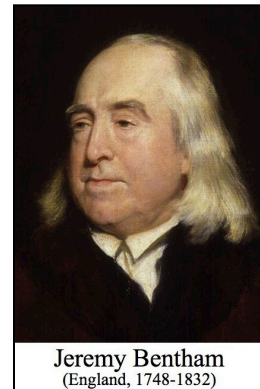
We evaluate actions in terms of the amount of pain or pleasure that they produce, and each pain and pleasure is evaluated in terms of the following criteria: “its intensity, its duration, its certainty or uncertainty, its propinquity or remoteness, its fecundity, its purity, and its extent — that is, the number of persons ... who are affected by it.” In more general terms, Bentham explained utilitarianism as follows:

By the Principle of Utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question; or what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness.

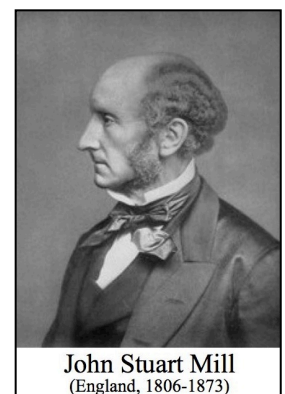
THE RIGHT AND THE GOOD

Utilitarianism is a **consequentialist** moral theory in that it decides the moral worth of an action solely on the basis of its consequences. Motives, intentions, the character of the agent — none of this ultimately matters in morally evaluating an action. A world filled with virtuous people acting always with good intentions will likely be a better world (insofar as it contains more of what is good); but such virtue and such intentions are worthy or desirable only so far as they increase this good — according to utilitarianism.

The general goal of consequentialist theories is to maximize the good; but what is this good that we are to maximize? Bentham believed that the good was pleasure, and in this regard he was closely followed by **John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873), whose father was a good friend of Bentham’s, and who became the leading advocate of utilitarianism in the generation following Bentham. In Mill’s short work entitled *Utilitarianism* (1861) we find one of the clearest and ablest discussions of utilitarianism, and it is this text that we will be considering in what follows.



Jeremy Bentham
(England, 1748-1832)



John Stuart Mill
(England, 1806-1873)

² This is not for lack of kidneys, but of willing donors. Less than one percent of those who die in the United States donate their organs. While many of these aren’t suitable organ donors, of the roughly 23,000 who die each year from brain death (and thus typically have healthy organs to donate), only 4,000 donate their organs.

Mill based utilitarianism on what he called the **greatest happiness principle (GHP)**: the right action among the alternatives open to us is the action that results in the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. This happiness was good in and of itself, something desired by all, and therefore our **final good**; every other good is only an **instrumental good**, as a means to happiness.

Both Mill and Bentham often write about maximizing happiness, but what they mean by happiness is always something very definite, namely, **pleasure and the absence of pain**. So utilitarianism is a form of **hedonism** (from the Greek word *hêdonê*, which means “pleasure”). The good is pleasure, which ultimately is just a certain kind of psychological state. Our actions will cause various people to experience pleasures and pains, and morally right actions are simply whichever will maximize pleasures and minimize pains, however that is managed.

Other utilitarians have wished to remain neutral as to what humans actually want, and so they view the good simply as the satisfaction of one’s preferences: here, an action is right insofar as it satisfies as many preferences as possible. These are the two most common conceptions of the good among utilitarians: pleasure and preference-satisfaction. In reading Mill, one can detect both of these understandings of the good. In particular, when Mill distinguishes between different kinds of pleasure, he seems to be basing his argument on the satisfaction of different preferences (see below).

MAXIMIZING THE NET GOOD, OVER THE LONG HAUL, FOR EVERYONE

A few possible ambiguities surrounding utilitarianism should be addressed immediately. One concerns “maximizing the good.” Presumably we want to maximize not the *total* good, but rather the balance of good over bad, or the *net* good. For instance, in running a business, the goal is not to maximize the total income but rather to maximize the profit (the net income). It’s obviously better to have \$500,000 in income and \$100,000 in expenses (for a net profit of \$400,000) than to have \$1 million in income and \$1 million in expenses (with no net profit).

This sort of consequentialism is intuitively plausible as a moral foundation. Consider Leibniz’s God creating the best of all possible worlds: presumably such a world will have the greatest balance of good over evil, since God is the source of the good, and would not allow more evil than necessary. Insofar as we want to do the right thing, it seems that we would want to emulate such God-like behavior and strive to increase the good and lessen the evil in the world.

Utilitarians also have the long view in mind when they speak of maximizing the net good. Actions that bring about a great deal of pleasure in the short run but which lead to considerable misery in the long run (say, addicting yourself to heroin) are not endorsed by utilitarians. Just how long a view the utilitarian should take, of course, is a question needing discussion (we will come back to this when we consider the problem of calculating the likely consequences of our actions).

Finally, utilitarianism does not place any special weight on the pleasures and pains of the agent. The greatest happiness principle refers not to the happiness of any one individual, but rather to the happiness of all humans — and, where possible, “to the whole sentient creation” (that is, to all creatures with the ability to experience pleasure and pain). This incorporates the “impartiality” criterion that is central to most ethical systems. Here, what we treat impartially are the pleasures and pains of each individual. Because Mill’s utilitarianism views the good as pleasure, we classify it as a kind of **hedonism**. But there are two broad kinds of hedonism: *private (egoistic)* and *social*. The first merely enjoins us to maximize our own pleasure while the second enjoins us to maximize the sum-total of everyone’s pleasure. The impartiality of Mill’s hedonism marks it as social.

ACT VS RULE UTILITARIANISM

More recent moral theorists have distinguished between two different kinds of utilitarianism: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. Mill does not distinguish between these two forms in his writing, and different passages suggest different interpretations (the difference probably wasn’t clear in his own mind).

Act utilitarianism is thought to be the “pure” utilitarian position, where each act is considered on its own merits. For any particular act, if performing it will maximize the good, then it should be performed; otherwise not. Act

utilitarianism may lead to certain theoretical problems (such as urging us not to keep private promises), for which reason some ethicists have promoted a modified version of utilitarianism called “rule utilitarianism.”

With *rule utilitarianism*, the item of moral evaluation isn't the individual act, but rather the rule it follows: if following a certain rule (instead of some other rule) maximizes the good, then that rule should be followed, even if it would turn out, with some instances, that happiness could be maximized by breaking the rule. This means, for instance, that certain applications of the rule might fail to maximize the good, but because that *kind* of act normally does maximize the good, then it is always right to so act. This form of utilitarianism has the advantage of being easier for human beings to follow: we have to evaluate only rules, rather than individual acts. It also has the advantage of avoiding certain problems of act utilitarianism, such as committing unjust (yet happiness-maximizing) acts. It has the intuitive disadvantage, however, of occasionally requiring us to perform acts even when doing so will clearly fail to maximize the good.

SOME MISUNDERSTANDINGS THAT MILL ADDRESSES

Utilitarianism is a Swine's Morality

Critics of utilitarianism have claimed that it is simply a kind of hedonism, equating what is morally good with the sensation of pleasure — and that this is no better than what swine pursue, lying about in the mud and swilling at the trough. The gist of this criticism is that Mill has misunderstood human nature: he believes that we desire only to “eat, drink, fornicate, and snore” (to quote one critic), when in fact we desire far more.

In responding to this criticism, Mill agrees that we desire far more than bodily pleasures, but chides the critics for assuming that this is the *only* kind of pleasure. Mill notes that there are *intellectual* as well as bodily pleasures, and that the former are even more desirable than the latter. What Mill seems to be claiming here is not that these are distinct *feelings*, but rather that we have *intellectual faculties* that want to be gratified and which then result in a “higher” kind of pleasure.

Mill gives us two arguments for the preferability of these higher pleasures. First, intellectual pleasures afford greater “permanency, safety, uncostliness.” Second, some kinds of pleasure are simply more desirable and more valuable than others, and these pleasures can be so ranked. How do we know this? We appeal to the “*Millian judge*,” someone who has known both kinds of pleasure: the objective means for ranking these pleasures according to their desirability is to ask such a judge which is preferable. And the answer, from those who have known both bodily and intellectual pleasures, is that the latter is far more desirable.

Utilitarianism is “Too Low a Calling” for Humans

Here the complaint is that utilitarianism doesn't ask enough of us. All it asks is that we do what makes us happy — but it seems as though we will do that anyway. Morality ought to be more challenging, it ought to encourage us to lead “better” lives, and utilitarianism does not seem to do this.

Mill replies that “in the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility.” What he apparently means by this is that the **impartiality** built into the Golden Rule (namely, that we should treat others as we would want them to treat us) is also included in the Greatest Happiness Principle. And indeed it is. The GHP does not instruct me to maximize my own happiness, but rather to maximize the overall happiness of all “sentient creation” (that is, all beings capable of feeling pleasure or pain). That means that I might often be required to sacrifice my own happiness (perhaps even my own life) so as to maximize the total happiness.