

Part IV

What Morality Could Be

Chapter 11

Utilitarianism



Figure 11.1: The greatest utility for everyone concerned . . .

11.1 Homework

Readings – EMP 6, 7 ; RTD 8, 16, 27 ; SLB 11

Study Questions –

1. What is the Principle of Utility?
2. What is Utilitarianism?
3. What are the three main tenets of classical utilitarianism?
4. What do you think of the idea that the ultimate goal of moral life is overall happiness? Is happiness a necessary part of our moral life? Is it sufficient?
5. What is hedonism? Do you agree with Mill that pleasure is the sole foundation of happiness?
6. How does John Stuart Mill argue against the idea that ethical theories which take the pursuit of pleasure as the foundation of morals are theories “worthy only of swine” (RTD p.72)?

7. Explain how Nozick's experience machine works. Would you plug yourself in? How is the idea of the experience machine relevant to hedonism? What can the utilitarian answer?
8. How does the idea that we should take a point of view of strict impartiality when deciding upon moral matters conflict with our common-sense morality? What can be the utilitarian's answer to this concern (give at least two)?
9. What is the sense of integrity according to Williams? How does the principle of utilitarianism conflict with our sense of integrity?
10. How does the idea that we should assess an action only on the basis of its consequences conflict with our common-sense morality? What can be the utilitarian's answers to this concern (give at least two)?

Discussion Questions :

1. In order to make a moral choice between possible alternatives, do you think one should take into account the possible consequences that each alternative will bring about? Do you think some other consideration should also enter into account? Which one(s) and why?
2. Do you think that we should be strictly impartial when making moral decisions?
3. Do you think that some moral rules should not suffer any exceptions, whatever the circumstances?

11.2 Introduction

- Up to now, we have
 1. explained the challenge that moral theories face, which is to answer two separate questions: (a) Are there fundamental moral values that we can justify as being such? and (b) (If yes) Which are these fundamental moral rules?
 2. considered unsatisfactory answers to such a challenge, that is to say, the answers given by Egoism, Religion and Nature
- We turn now to the more positive part of the course, in which we will study the four moral theories that are currently actively discussed by philosophers:
 1. Utilitarianism
 2. Duty Theory
 3. Social Contract Theories
 4. Theories of Virtue

- Presumably, none of these theories will appear to you as giving the definite answer to the problem of morality. That said, discussing these theories, their respective advantages and drawbacks, should allow us to determine a list of desiderata for our “ideal” theory of morality.

11.3 Utilitarianism: History and Basics

11.3.1 History

Origin and Scope – The theory of Utilitarianism

- was developed in a particular **historical context**: the 18th-19th centuries in Europe: tremendous changes on the political, religious and economical levels: aftermath of the downfall of Christendom as a unified political entity, of absolute kingdoms, and ultimately of feudal systems. In replacement: Rise of democracy, industrial revolution, and capitalism.

- is oriented toward **practice**: Utilitarians were hoping to develop an ethical theory which would be fit for the modern society. Utilitarians were very active in political life. They hope their views on ethics can have direct impact on economical, and social policies.

- is intended to give a **secular and anti-metaphysical view on morality**: Utilitarians share Hume’s idea that morality should be given common sensical and empirical grounds.

- can be seen as an attempt to “**objectify subjectivism**” – Morality is based on the way we feel, but this does not mean that there is no objective ground for morality. Indeed, all humans function in similar ways, and hence, share many of our feelings. Morality can be based on these common feelings that we all share.

- has become **one of the most important views on ethics**. Utilitarianism has had a huge impact on social and political policies.

→ *Utilitarians want to design an ethical theory which will give a clear and uncontroversial method for our individual, political and social practices in the modern society.*

Founding Fathers :

- **Jeremy Bentham** (1748-1832) *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) – social reformer: poor laws, lunacy laws, and prison reform for a more human treatment of people. First person to have given his body to a school of anatomy – His mummified body is exposed in the library of University College, London

- **John Stuart Mill** (1806-1873) *Utilitarianism* (1861) – social reformer as well, worked on politics, economics, logic and philosophy, elected to parliament: suffrage for women, abolition of slavery, extension of education to working classes

→ *Both were progressists, ahead of their times*



Figure 11.2: Jeremy Bentham



Figure 11.3: John Stuart Mill

11.3.2 Basics of Utilitarianism

Basic Insights : Two basic insights:

1. The aim of morality is to make the world a better place;
2. When assessing moral actions, the consequences of these actions are the most important

The Principle of Utility: the core of Utilitarianism – The above two insight are captured by the Principle of Utility:

Definition 24 – *Principle of Utility*

According to the Principle of Utility, what is right to do is whatever has for consequence to maximize the utility for everyone concerned.

Utilitarianism is then

Definition 25 – *Utilitarianism*

Utilitarianism is the view on morality according to which what is right to do is whatever has for consequence to maximize the utility for everybody concerned.

Three main components :

1. **Utility:** what is right to do is whatever has for consequence to maximize the utility for everybody concerned.

The notion of Utility obviously needs to be made more precise. What is the proper standard of utility? how can we measure utility?

The founding fathers proposed that the yardstick of utility be pleasure and happiness. Other proposals have been made since.

→ *The moral life is concerned with bringing about the best for everybody. The question is this “best” consists in.*

2. **Radical Impartiality:** what is right to do is whatever has for consequence to maximize the utility for *everybody concerned*.

→ *We must take everybody concerned when we make an ethical decision. Impartial point of view*

3. **Consequentialism:** what is right to do is whatever has for *consequence* to maximize the utility for everybody concerned.

→ *Actions are assessed only in terms of their consequences (Intentions do not count)*

A radical and very demanding theory – does this view seem trivial to you?

Despite its apparent easy-going principle, utilitarianism is actually

- A **radical doctrine:** The only thing you care about if you are a strict utilitarian is the amount of happiness involved. Though it seems commonsensical enough, it has implications that run counter many of our current practices

Example of Voluntary Assisted Suicide: Matthew and Harold Donnelly – harsh decision are made “easy” under the strict utilitarian rule

- A very **demanding doctrine:** Utilitarianism imposes on us extreme duties. This is because requiring to bring the greatest amount of happiness to everybody concerned is often requiring that our special interests and values be put aside!

Example of Starvation

→ *Utilitarianism is thus the view on morality which starts off with a commonsensical insight: a moral action is an action which has for consequence to make the world a better place to live in for everybody. However commonsensical it may be, when such an insight is taken as the core principle of a theory of ethics, the results is quite radical and very demanding.*

We shall now look at each of the three components of utilitarianism in turn, discuss possible difficulties that the view faces, and consider possible refinements in the light of such difficulties.

11.4 Utility

According to the utilitarians, a moral action is about bringing the best consequences to everyone, or, in their vocabulary, it is about increasing the utility for everyone. But what exactly is utility? What is its proper standard? And how do we measure it?

11.4.1 Classical Utilitarianism: Hedonism

According to the founding fathers Bentham and Mill is: *the yardstick of utility is nothing but pleasure* – this is called **hedonism** (hedone in Greek = pleasure)

“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness pain, and the privation of pleasure” (RTD p.71)

So the idea is:

1. Pleasure and freedom from pain are our ultimate goal in every action
2. Happiness and Utility are just this: feeling pleasure and not feeling any pain.

What do you think? Is pleasure our ultimate goal in life? Is pleasure all there is to happiness?

Definition 26 – Hedonistic Utilitarianism

Hedonistic Utilitarianism is the view on morality according to which the right thing to do is whatever has for consequence to maximize the amount of pleasure felt by everyone concerned.

A “doctrine only worthy of swine”? – It is not obvious that morality has anything to do with the amount of pleasure that we feel. A immediate objection against hedonism is that such a doctrine amounts to legitimate as moral the satisfaction of base desires (say: food, sex, and sleep). But, the objections goes, humans can do better than this.

A few examples of situations in which someone can take pleasure

- Making a scientific discovery
- Throwing stones in the water
- Watching *Beerfest* eating pizza and drinking beer
- Having a gourmet dinner with wine tasting
- Torturing helpless people
- Helping helpless people

So, what kinds of pleasure is Mill talking about? Is he telling us that happiness consists solely in satisfying our base instincts? If other kinds of pleasure are also part of the picture, are all kinds of pleasure equally valuable?

Different values for different kinds of pleasure – Mill’s answer is that:

1. Humans are indeed able of different kinds of pleasure.
2. The most valuable kinds of pleasure are these in which humans take the most pleasure

—→ *So, against the idea that pleasure is reduced to the satisfaction of our base instincts, Mill claims that our deepest, strongest pleasures are connected with the exercise of our most refined faculties: spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic faculties, sense of dignity.*

Compare the pleasure taken in:

- passive vs. active activities: hike up the mountain or take the chair lift? watching the weather channel or reading a novel? listening to a CD or playing in a band?
- low / high: talking about the weather or talking about the meaning of life?

Note that Mill is not saying that eating pizza and drinking beer while watching *Beerfest* does not give you pleasure! But the pleasure you get from this is less intense, and hence less desirable than the pleasure taken in higher activities.

Mill’s Trade Thought Experiment :

- **The trade** – Mill provides the following thought experiment in support of his claim that intense pleasure are connected with refined activities:
Take two kinds of pleasure. Take anyone who knows both. Then this person is going to prefer the highest kind of pleasure.
- **Refined Pleasures and Frustration:** Note that this is true even if a fully human life involves *more frustration* than the grazing-cow life!

“Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast’s pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they be persuaded that the fool, the dunce or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot that they are with theirs” (RTD p.73)

“It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low, has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied; and a highly-endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable; and they will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the goods which those imperfections qualify. It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the

pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.” (RTD p.74)

What about you? Would you trade your life for the one of the happy idiot?

- **The knowledgeable choice:** It is important to note that the experiment requires that the people who are making a choice between two kinds of pleasure (lower vs higher) know both. This is because the happy idiot (just as the grazing cow) is not asking for more.

For example, I am willing to say that if you think that reading Shakespeare is not going to give you more pleasure than reading Britney Spears’ autobiography, it is because you lack the skills needed to enjoy reading Shakespeare (just like someone can lack the skills to enjoy playing chess, playing the guitar etc.).

How can we explain that people go for the lower-level pleasures? – Mill’s answer:

1. That most people choose the lower-level pleasures is compatible with their appreciating that higher-level pleasures are more valuable
2. The problem is that high-level pleasures take some work.

Mill: “Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance”

Compare with exercise: don’t use your muscles, you won’t feel like using them anymore. Likewise, don’t use your brain, you won’t feel like using it anymore!

→ *So, Bentham and Mill take it that the yardstick of utility is just the amount of pleasure. Utilitarianism is then the view that the right thing to do is to do whatever has for consequence to maximize the amount of pleasure felt by everyone concerned. Mill and Bentham provide a subtle analysis of the kinds of pleasures which have to be taken into consideration, such that the obvious objections against hedonistic utilitarianism are avoided. There remains some difficulties though.*

11.4.2 Objections to Hedonism and Possible Refinements of the View

Let us consider one main objection against the idea that pleasure is the yardstick of utility, or how to make us happy and the world a better place to live in. And let us see how the utilitarian can refine his view in the light of such an objection.

The Objection from Nozick: feeling pleasure is not enough – Nozick proposes to consider the following thought experiment:

Imagine that there exists an “experience machine”, which simulates any activity of your choice, such that, when you are plugged in, you are unaware of being plugged in and all the pleasure associated with these activities are yours.

It is crucial for Nozick's experiment that you have to get de-plugged on a regular basis, and thus be aware that you are not living what you are living.

- Nozick's question is: "Would you plug in?"

- Think about the character Cypher in the *Matrix*: chooses to eat the steak.

→ *Nozick's point is to make us think about the following question: "What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?" His main claim is that, in addition to having pleasure, we want to have a certain kind of contact with reality.*

Refinement of the theory :

- **Two important alternatives** to hedonism:

- **G.E. Moore**: Utility measured in terms of the realization of **ideals** (freedom, knowledge, art)

Definition 27 – Ideal Utilitarianism

Ideal Utilitarianism is the view on morality according to which the right thing to do is whatever has for consequence to maximize the realization of everyone's ideals.

- **Kenneth Arrow**: Utility measured in terms of the realization of **individual preferences**. Arrow developed a formal model for social choice.

Definition 28 – Preference Utilitarianism

Preference Utilitarianism is the view on morality according to which the right thing to do is whatever has for consequence to maximize the realization of everyone's preferences.

- **Assessment**:

- **The advantages** of the two views above are that

1. They do not confine utility to experience. They thus answer to Nozick's objection.
2. They allow for **multiple** goods for an individual, as well as for different goods for different individuals – pluralistic view

- **The main disadvantage** is that the notions of ideals and preferences are **harder to handle**. In particular, how do we measure the realization of ideals?

→ *It seems that the closer we get from an acceptable standard of utility, the more difficult it is to find a quantifiable measure for it.*

11.4.3 Conclusion on Utility

We have seen that:

- The founding fathers of Utilitarianism took that the standard of utility is just how much is felt by everybody concerned
- Such a view was subtle enough to accommodate the fact that we, as human being, take different kinds of pleasure in different kinds of activities.
- That said, there remains an important objection, which is that pleasant feelings are not all there is to a life of fulfillment. The world would not be a better place if we were all plugged to experience machines.
- Some interesting alternative to hedonism have been proposed, in which the standard for utility is either the realization of ideals or of preferences
- The problem with these proposals is that utility ends up being less easy to measure, which means that the method for deciding which action is the right thing to do is less straightforward.

Given that to provide a straightforward answer to ethical issues is one of the most attractive features of utilitarianism, it seems that Arrow's preference utilitarianism is the best option here.