

**Part V**  
**Utilitarianism**



# Chapter 12

## Utilitarianism

### 12.1 Homework

Readings – EMP 6, 7 and RTD 8, 16

Study Questions –

1. What is morality about according to Bentham?
2. What is the Principle of Utility?
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. Do you agree with Mill when he says that pleasure, or freedom from pain, are the only desirable goals and that everything we do, we do ultimately “as means to the promotion of pleasure and prevention of pain”?
6. 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)?
7. 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)?
8. 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)?
9. Explain how Nozick’s experience machine works. Why do you think most of us would not accept to plug himself/herself in?
10. How does the principle of utilitarianism conflict with a sense of integrity according to Williams? How would you define your personal integrity?

## 12.2 Utilitarianism: Basics

Utilitarianism is the first important view that we will see in ethics.

### Origin and Scope – Utilitarianism

- is rooted in Hume's work – utilitarians share Hume's idea that morality should be given *common sensical and naturalistic grounds* by contrast to metaphysical or religious grounds.
- is 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, capitalism.
- is oriented toward practice: *Utilitarians develop a new form of morality for the new world.* Utilitarians were very active in political life. They hope their views on ethics can have direct impact on economical, and social policies.
- Became an important view, had huge impact and still among the best views on ethics  
So, utilitarians want to make morality: *secular, commonsensical, and practical.*

### Founding Fathers :

- 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 Univesity 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*

### Basic Insight and Imperative :

- The basic insight of utilitarianism is : *the aim of morality is to make the world a better place.*
- The Imperative is the so-called ***Principle of Utility*** : *what is right to do is whatever will bring the best consequences for everyone concerned.*

What are the best consequences? – *happiness*

So:

### Definition 19 – *Utilitarianism*

*Utilitarianism is the view on morality according to which what is right to do is whatever brings as a consequence the greatest amount of happiness to everybody concerned.*

We'll see that there are various ways in which the notion of happiness can be construed. That said, before we go in any further details, let us see what the three main components of utilitarianism are:

### Three main components :

1. *Eudemonism*: what is right to do is whatever brings as a consequence the greatest amount of *happiness* to everybody concerned. (eudemonia in Greek = happiness)

→ The aim for our moral life is more happiness

2. *Radical Equality*: what is right to do is whatever brings as a consequence the greatest amount of happiness to *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 brings *as a consequence* the greatest amount of happiness to everybody concerned.

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

### Why this is not a truism – does this view seem trivial to you?

Despite its apparent easy-going principle, utilitarianism is actually

- a radical doctrine: example of Voluntary Assisted Suicide: Matthew and Harold Donnelly

- a very demanding doctrine: Starvation, animal rights – animals are able of happiness / non-happiness

Bentham: “The question is not: Can they reason or can they talk? But Can they suffer?”

→ *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*

→ *In particular, requiring to bring the greatest amount of happiness to everybody concerned is often requiring that our special interests and values be put aside!*

## 12.3 Eudemonism: is happiness enough?

The first component of utilitarianism: eudemonism, i.e, the idea that *the ultimate goal of moral life is the search for happiness.*

Now, what is happiness? There are several answer, but the first answer that was given by the founding fathers is: *happiness 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 is 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?

**A “doctrine only worthy of swine”?** – Mill considers the objection that the satisfaction of base desires (say: food, sex, and sleep) cannot constitute what most of us consider happiness. 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 are less intense, and hence less desirable than the pleasure taken in higher activities.

### Mill's argument – the trade

Take two kinds of pleasure. Take anyone *who knows both*. Then this person is going to prefer the highest kind of pleasure.

In short: How many barrels of grazing-cow-like pleasure would you trade for a barrel of fully human life?

Note that 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 than 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?

*Important: the expert needs to know both sides:* Of course, 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 ).

### Objections :

**From Mill: people go for the lower pleasures** – Mill’s answer:

- compatible with the appreciation that higher pleasures are more valuable
- “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!

**From Nozick** – The Experience Machine

All activities are simulated. All the pleasure associated with these activities are yours.

“Would you plug in?”

Nozick’s point: in addition to having pleasure, we want to have a certain kind of contact with reality.

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

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... but what if we would not have to re-plug every two years?

**Other things that matter** – Refinement of the theory:

- G.E. Moore: Utility measured in terms of the realization of *ideals* (freedom, knowledge, art)
- Kenneth Arrow: overall happiness = *aggregation of individual preferences*. Arrow developed a formal model for social choice. Advantage: leave room for differences between individuals, i.e. pluralistic view

**Conclusion on Eudemonism :**

- The doctrine about human nature which underlies utilitarianism: our ultimate goal in our actions is happiness.
- There are difficulties in defining what happiness is. Pleasure (hedonism)? Ideals? Each person preferences?
- There may be difficulties in measuring happiness.

That said, not clear that there are definitive objections against it.



## 12.4 Radical Equality: Is Utilitarianism too demanding?

The second component of utilitarianism: radical equality, i.e. the idea that *everyone concerned counts, and counts equally*.

Mill (RTD p.76):

“[T]he happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.”

This is something we encountered before: the point of view of strict impartiality comes from the idea that we should be equally concerned for everyone.

→ *In utilitarianism, strict equality implies strict impartiality.*

The idea of radical equality (I should treat everybody in the exact same way) is attractive. Everyone concerned counts, and counts equally. That said, you may want to consider seriously the following consequence: if your own happiness is going to decrease in order to raise to overall happiness of everyone concerned, then, as a good utilitarian, you should accept it as right. Is this *too demanding*

There are at least three ways in which we can criticize utilitarianism for being too demanding

**Conflation of moral requirements and moral favors** – This should be familiar by now.

Because of its requirement for strict impartiality, utilitarianism transforms moral favors into moral requirements. It requires us to be Great Samaritans. There are two aspects of this:

**1. Material side** – cf. Singer on World Hunger

**2. Immaterial side** – By utilitarian standard, one’s life must be dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole.

So: Utilitarianism requires that you abandon any project or activity which does not obviously increase the amount of happiness in the world as a whole.

**The problem of personal development** – All these are activities which improve *the individual’s personal development* without having any great impact on the welfare of the society as a whole must be abandoned by the utilitarian. But these activities may be what make us interesting people leading rich lives.

A caricatural example: the hermit meditating in the mountain

Examples from Rachels: You are interested in history and you read a lot: what’s wrong with it?

But also: reading novels, play instruments or sports, having dinner with friends, throwing parties

**The problem of personal relations** – Neglect of family and friends in favor of strangers?

Example of the single mother in NYC again.

Another example: the father and the welfare of the society

**Conclusion** – Utilitarianism imposes on us the point of view of strict impartiality. This has important consequences concerning the kind of life that, as good utilitarians, we ought to live. A good utilitarian is committed to engage in all these actions that improves the general welfare of the society as a whole, and to engage only in them. This is a lot to ask, and many reject utilitarianism for this reason

**A possible refinement of the view** – Different weights on different persons? Preferences – It might be someone's preference that friends and family weigh more.

Other refinements of the view have been proposed to deal with the problem is radical equality

## 12.5 Consequentialism: Is Utilitarianism too permissive?

The third component of utilitarianism: consequentialism, i.e. the idea that moral actions are assessed *solely in terms of their consequences*.

Rachels p. 103:

“The theory's most fundamental idea is that, in order to determine whether an action is right, we should look at *what will happen as a result of doing it*.”

The relevant distinction here is between

1. The *motives* of your actions
2. The *consequences* of your actions

Utilitarians consider that the *motives do not count* when we assess an action as right or wrong. Only the consequences do. So:

- If your motives are good, but the outcome of your action is rather disastrous, then you have done something bad, period. No answer like: “but I had good intentions!”

- Conversely, if your motives are wicked, but the consequences of your actions promote overall welfare, then your actions are good, period. No answer like: “but his motives are awful!”

Many have criticized utilitarianism on this aspect at least on three levels:

**1. The problem of uncertainty** – Here are some examples in which assessment by utilitarian standard runs against common sense

**1. Jones and Tom** – Suppose Jones hates Tom, and Jones is going to kill Tom by hitting him with a hammer in the head. Suppose Jones does just that, and thinks

Tom is dead. Instead, Tom is found by his girlfriend and taken to the hospital. At the hospital, diagnostics reveal that Tom has brain cancer, which has not yet metastasized. They remove the cancer, and ultimately Tom's life is saved. If Jones had not hit Tom with the hammer, Tom would have died a very unpleasant death from cancer. Now, if he can avoid Jones, Tom will lead a long happy life.

Did Jones do something right?

- 2. Socrates' trial** – Is Socrates responsible for the ways in which his teaching was used? (Aristophanes: young people using the power of arguments against their parents to prove that a child can beat his parents)

→ *One main problem with consequentialism is that the future is uncertain. Because of this, the actual consequences of our actions may not match the intended ones.*

**Refinement 1: Intended vs. Actual consequences** – Given this, a possible refinement of utilitarianism would be that we assess moral action on the basis of the *foreseeable* consequences and not on the basis of the actual ones. This is the idea of *subjective utilitarianism*.

**Definition 20 – Subjective Utilitarianism**

*Subjective Utilitarianism is the view on morality according to which what is right to do is whatever the agent can foresee as bringing as a consequence the greatest amount of happiness to everybody concerned.*

Is this enough to make consequentialism acceptable?

- 2. The conflict with justice, rights and Integrity** – Rachels and Williams – The previous criticism is that it is hard to judge our action on the basis of the consequences because of a fact: the uncertainty of the actual consequences. Now, there seems to be a more conceptual reason why consequentialism is unsatisfactory, even if we count only the intended consequences. Here is some examples.

**McCloskey and the riot cases** – cases in which scapegoating a single individual may will bring social peace

**Angela York and the police officers** – nude photos. Improved happiness of the policemen. If she does not know about it, the utilitarian is committed to say that it is right

**The case of the Peeping Tom** – Jim spies on your neighbor through her bedroom window. She does not know about it, and nobody else will. So, his action has only one consequence: it makes him happy to see a naked woman every night (possibly, this will keep his frustration low, so that he will not go and rape someone outside.) Is it the right thing to do?

**The transplant** – kill 1 to save 5?

**William's examples** – George the chemist – Jim the visiting dignitary

Real life example: Nazi medical experimentations on Prisoners

Utilitarianism seem to require people to act against their deep moral commitments so they can't live with moral integrity – a wholeness of character, or a feeling of harmony between their deep values and acts. A strict utilitarian must lack either basic moral values, or moral integrity.

Think about: the woman who killed the policeman in order to save the jewish family.

→ *Consequentialism puts Utilitarianism on a collision course with justice and rights.*

This is because rights can be justified within the utilitarian doctrine only insofar as they promote the general welfare. But there will be contexts in which what will make most people happy involves to break some of these rights. In such contexts, utilitarianism forces us to favor the good consequences over the rights.

**Refinement 2: Rule vs. Act utilitarianism** – One answer to the concerns above is to modify the view:

**Definition 21** – *Rule Utilitarianism*

*Rule Utilitarianism is the view on morality according to which what is right to do is to act according to the rule which brings as a consequence the greatest amount of happiness to everybody concerned.*

In this case, the utilitarian standard does not guide us in particular actions but rather in defining the *set of rules which is optimal for the general welfare.*

The idea is then that to secure rights and justice have overall good consequences for the society as a whole. We assess a given rule in looking at its consequence *when applied publicly by everybody.*

Arguably, taking scapegoating, killing an innocent for transplant, or violating someone's intimacy as rules would have disastrous consequences on the overall society. In particular, this would undermine a necessary sense of trust in the institutions.

That said, Rule Utilitarianism runs into other problems:

1. what to do with exceptions? – Kill one innocent to avoid a genocide? the harder the rule-utilitarian digs in her heels and defends strict obedience to the rule, the more she moves from the heart of the theory, for which, after all, consequences are all that matters.

**Alternative Option– Bite the bullet** – J. C. Smart – defends strict consequentialism for utilitarianism. His answer to the problems above:

1. Most of these cases feature bad calculations – In the scapegoating case: the consequences would be disastrous if people were to find out about it.

Does it solve the problem? What about a case where we know for sure we won't get caught?

## 2. Common sense is wrong

We should not rely on our gut-reactions to assess actions. What we call "absolute rules of morality" have no other ground than the overall welfare of the society. We made them sacred over time, but we should not. Maybe it is simply wrong

- to think that our friends and family should count more, or that humans count more than animals

- to think that intentions matter when we assess an action – notice that we should distinguish between *assessing the action* and *assessing an agent* – utilitarianism is only concerned with the assessment of actions.

- to think that there are absolute moral rules, rights etc. like "it is always morally wrong to kill an innocent person"

## 12.6 Conclusion

Rachels p. 115:

"Utilitarianism is a radical doctrine that challenges many commonsense assumptions. In this respect, it does what good philosophy always does – it requires us to rethink matters that we have heretofore taken for granted"

So: what to take from utilitarianism ?

1. Recognize the importance and efficiency of the view for many policy decisions
2. The importance of the consequences of our actions
3. The suspicion that some of our gut-reactions and common-sensical intuitions may not be our best guides

