# Forum Digest for Lectures 3 and 4 (lecture release date was March 19th)

## The nature of utility

Both Mill and Bentham thought of utility in terms of **pleasure minus pain (Hedonistic Utilitarianism**).

By contrast, in contemporary economics, utility is understood in terms of **desire satisfaction minus desire non-satisfaction (Desire Satisfaction Utilitarianism**). It is important to note that maximizing desire satisfaction minus desire non-satisfaction has nothing to do with the maximization of money. Understanding utility in terms of desire-satisfaction minus desire non-satisfaction can be used to support **Free Market Utilitarianism**: Market behavior is a measure of (a) what people desire (e.g. what they buy) and (b) how much they desire it (how much will they pay). The inference drawn is (c) letting people buy what they want for the price they'll pay maximizes desire satisfaction, hence utility.

Still different, is the approach that conceives of utility in terms of money or GDP. This allows you to value lives in terms of their wages, output etc. E.g. smoking is good to the extent that it reduces healthcare costs through early death.

## Objective versus subjective value

Utilitarianism believes in the objective value of pleasure, desire satisfaction etc.

It is only subjectivist/relativist to the extent that it recognizes that people take pleasure in (or desire) different things.

## Who has a right to decide which actions maximize utility?

According to utilitarianism, which action/policy will maximize utility is an objective fact which people can be wrong about. The question that remains is, what is the evidence or how do we know which action/policy will maximize utility.

If the best evidence turns out to be majority vote, utilitarianism may support democracy. If the best evidence turns out to be the view of a wise autocrat, utilitarianism may support that decision procedure. If it turns out that the best evidence is market behavior, etc.

**The relevance of short-run (short-term) vs. long-run (long-term) consequences for the utilitarian calculation**

Most of the posts regarding the example of throwing Christians to the lions focused on whether or not utilitarianism should (or must) include offensive preferences. However, it's worth considering whether Benthamite utilitarianism, which does not make qualitative distinctions among pleasures, possesses any resources to object to this practice. As student LPS posted, "The effects of society over the long-term - decline in the "value" of human life, more violence, etc. - are on the negative side of the ledger. In some calculations, therefore, the short-term collective pleasure in total may therefore be less than society's collective pain [over the long-term]." A sensible utilitarianism will take into account the effect that practices have in developing the habits and dispositions of its citizens, and since preferences for violence necessitate the existence of pain, a Benthamite utilitarian has reason to work to reform them.

**How can a utilitarian, or anyone, be certain that an act will maximize happiness?**

One of the key features of utilitarianism is that it judges rightness and wrongness with reference to the consequences of one's actions. In the discussion forum, quite of few of you expressed the worry that most of the time, we cannot be 100% certain of the consequences of our actions. For example, the guardrail question invites us to consider all of the possible benefits that will be gained or foregone, depending on the adoption of one policy or another. The worry is legitimate, but it is also important to note that utilitarians have a response. In situations of uncertainty, utilitarianism will advocate maximizing *expected* utility, which we find by multiplying the sum value of an outcome by its probability of occurrence.

**What is and what is not the role of the government**

In the discussion of the poll question for lecture 4 (“All things being equal, should the government use public funds to invest in museums rather than sports arenas?”) many participants supported their response to both the poll and the challenge question by pointing toward a view about what is the role of government (i.e. what is a legitimate/justifiable role of government) and what is not the role of government (i.e. what is an illegitimate/unjustifiable role of government). For example: Many of those who responded “Yes” to the poll question supported their answer by asserting that the role of the government is education but not entertaining the masses. By contrast, many of those who responded “No” to the poll question supported their answer by asserting that the role of the government is to give the people what they want or what leads to the most pleasure overall (with the assumption that all pleasures are equal).

Some students stopped here, while others pushed further and offered reasons in support of their claims that “It is the (legitimate) role of the government to do x and it is not the role of the government to do y.” It was interesting to see that some students used utilitarian reasoning to defend their claims, relying on observations about a) what maximizes pleasure overall (in the spirit of Bentham) or b) including Mill’s distinction of higher and lower pleasures in the utilitarian calculation) while others departed from utilitarian reasoning altogether (e.g. by claiming that the role of the government is to support activities/projects that cannot sustain themselves). Now, the next stage is to inquire about these reasons. For example: What can be said in support of the claim that the role of the government is to cultivate the higher pleasures in its citizens rather than to give its citizens what they want? We will see in the following weeks that libertarians, Rawls, Kant, and Aristotle provide the material to push this inquiry further.

**The force and limitation of “slippery slope” arguments**

Over the past two weeks, several individuals have objected that taking a certain action would lead down a "slippery slope." For example, if we kill one person to save 10,000,000, then this will lead to killing one person to save two people. We should not take the first action (which is permissible) because it will lead to the second action (which is impermissible). This is also sometimes called a "precedent effect." The crucial point is to explain how the first step leads to the second step. Is it a psychological claim about how future individuals will misinterpret the principle? Is it logical claim that same arguments that support the first action also necessarily support the second? If you want your "slippery slope" argument to be forceful, it is important to explain how you think it operates and what conclusions one is to draw from it.