

UTILITARIANISM

UTILITARIAN (ARGUMENT section of OUTLINE).....8

UTILITARIANISM-promotes consequences that bring the greatest benefit AND the least harm overall.

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory

Consequentialism examines the ethical results of an action, not the ethical mindset that caused the action. Utilitarianism always discusses consequences of actions.

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

Bentham was the founder of utilitarianism. He states in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789):

The pleasure principle, the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.

The ability to suffer, not the ability to reason, be the benchmark of how we treat other beings.

Notice immediately that there is no distinction here between **who** is suffering, and there is no distinction between one form of suffering and another. Suffering is suffering. Animals count as much as people. There are no people who count more than others.

EXAMPLE You must kill or severely harm a child who is in the line of fire of someone who will kill hundreds of people if not stopped. Ethically, utilitarianism would say you must sacrifice the child to save hundreds if you can clearly see that the result would be savings so many lives.

Utilitarianism may seem at times outrageous, and through his calculus Bentham sometimes seems heartless and cold. But unlike any and all other philosophers we will look at, Bentham was active in trying to reform the world he lived in. He was active in political parties, and he used his utilitarianism and his pleasure calculus to try and persuade politicians to vote for reforms in England. He advocated:

- freedom of expression
- equality for women
- animal rights
- abolition of slavery
- abolition of physical punishment (including that of children)
- chance to divorce
- free trade
- defended homosexuality
- inheritance tax

- restrictions on monopoly power
- pensions
- health insurance.

He was as ethically advanced as we can imagine a man of his day could be. Many of the reforms he worked hard for have only been realized in the late 20th Century.

Bentham & his Pleasure Calculus (CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS)

Bentham actually lays out a formula for calculating the ethics of an action according to how much overall pleasure/pain the action will cause, this is his pleasure calculus

- INTENSITY--How strong is the pleasure?
- DURATION--How long will the pleasure last?
- LIKELIHOOD--How likely or unlikely is it that the pleasure will occur?
- PROPINQUITY/REMOTENESS--How soon will the pleasure occur?
- FECUNDITY--will action likely bring more pleasure?
- PURITY--The probability it will be followed by pain.
- EXTENT--How many people will be affected?

Here are quotes where Bentham outlines how the pleasure calculus should work:

1. Sum up all the values of all the pleasures on the one side, and those of all the pains on the other. The balance, if it be on the side of pleasure, will give the good tendency of the act upon the whole, with respect to the interests of that individual person; if on the side of pain, the bad tendency of it upon the whole.

2. Take an account of the number of persons whose interests appear to be concerned; and repeat the above process with respect to each. Sum up the numbers expressive of the degrees of good tendency, which the act has, with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is good upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is good upon the whole: do this again with respect to each individual, in regard to whom the tendency of it is bad upon the whole. Take the balance which if on the side of pleasure, will give the general good tendency of the act, with respect to the total number or community of individuals concerned; if on the side of pain, the general evil tendency, with respect to the same community.

Below, just to give you an idea of how Bentham crunched the numbers:

- 1. Begin with any one person of those whose interests seem most immediately to be affected by it: and take an account,*
- 2. Of the value of each distinguishable pleasure which appears to be produced by it in the first instance.*

3. *Of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it in the first instance.*
4. *Of the value of each pleasure which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pleasure and the impurity of the first pain.*
5. *Of the value of each pain which appears to be produced by it after the first. This constitutes the fecundity of the first pain, and the impurity of the first pleasure.*

Very detailed calculations that go on and on for each person involved.

A MODERN APPLICATION OF THE PLEASURE CALCULUS

Our version will be much simplified, but gives the gist of the Bentham calculus. We take as an example, the tortures of POWs in Iraq.

We first assign points to those who got pleasure.

250 average points of pleasure for each guard torturing prisoners X 30 guards

We assign pain points to the POWs

60,000 average points of pain for each tortured prisoner X 300 prisoners. Simple enough.

Pleasure

250 X 30

750 pleasure points

Pain

60,000 X 300

1,800,000 pain points

So pain outweighs the pleasure, right? Wait a minute, not so easy. How did we come up with these points for pleasure & pain?! According to Bentham you need to know the intensity. Animal pain, human pain, are all equally pain.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

John Stuart Mill was the godson of Bentham and they were very close. Mill was raised as a Utilitarian. He believed later that Bentham was too reliant on the notion of physical pleasure and pain.

Mill introduced a distinction between lower and higher pleasures.

Better to be a human miserable than a pig satisfied.

Modern Utilitarianism reflects the contributions made by John Stuart Mill. Pleasure and pain cannot be simply equated with physical reactions or affects. If we believe that pleasure & pain are not easily quantified then we have to take into account different kinds of suffering. Not everyone affected in the tortured prisoners case was considered, and all results were not considered. We must also consider emotional reactions that do not simply equate with physical suffering. But if we do so, then we must consider any people who are not directly physically affected, but might be emotionally affected.

OTHER AFFECTED PERSONS & OTHER RESULTS TO CONSIDER

- Families, friends, and communities of those tortured suffered great anguish to learn of or see these tortures
- Those guards who were tried and convicted, they got pleasure originally, they get pain to pay now
- Families of those guards, how embarrassing for them!
- The whole military, morale was brought down, less respect for military.
- Military officials suffered, at least one was fired.
- Did the Republican Party lose support? YES, the whole Republican party suffered.
- Most Americans lost some confidence and trust in government, bringing down our sense of well-being just slightly.
- Such actions by U.S. encourage Jihad. If this leads to a terrorist act in the future, those hurt by that future terrorism must be considered.
- One last consideration. Did these tortures help to discover information from prisoners about possible terror cells or future planned terrorists acts? (that is what was supposed to have been the reason for the tortures)

So when you do utilitarian analysis **you must consider everyone!**

NOTE.

What I have given here is just a list of everyone who is harmed. You would need to write a sentence or two about each group and describe their harm in more detail.

OUR VERSION OF UTILITARIANISM (modern utilitarianism)

BENEFIT & HARM

We have through the centuries broadened utilitarianism so it encompasses more than the hedonistic concepts of pleasure and pain. Benefit and harm take into consideration more than mere pleasure. You may not be happy, yet better off not seeking a goal of happiness that will forever elude you. You may not think happiness should be the goal in life. Some people get very much pleasure out of physical pain. Pleasure and pain are just inadequate ethical standards.

Benefit allows for a more encompassing ethics of utility. *Benefit* does encompass physical pleasure, but it allows for a quiet life of very little physical intensity. *Benefit* can refer to a successful life, or a life of nurturing and giving. These goals might come at great pain to you, yet you might find this the most beneficial life. Discussing *overall benefit or overall harm* gives us more room to stress other human values besides happiness and pain. So, we will not discuss pleasure and pain. Instead, we discuss benefit and harm.

NO NUMBER CRUNCHING

No-one today actually crunches numbers. That just seems an unethical thing to do. We cannot assign a number value to the benefit people get from the results of an action. We cannot assign number values to harm done to people. Assigning such number values seems like equating humans with objects. Human beings deserve more than a statistical number. Instead we vaguely assert that there is more harm or less on the whole.

NOTE.

Be careful when using Utilitarianism that you **stick to the original act** and a clear indirect result.

For example there are two acts here:

1. The tortures
2. The discovery of the tortures

These 2 actions are closely related and can stand as one, since the discovery brought ethical consequences that the original act would have brought. For example, families would have been painfully embarrassed by their relatives torturing these POWs if they knew without the press leaking the case. The military official who was fired, ethically should have been fired even if the press had not run the story. Chance of Jihad would increase too since Iraqis would hear about this from families of POWs, etc.

But if you look at a further action that brings a different ethical outcome, you will get major points off for confusing two actions.

EXAMPLE: Suppose you say that overall, the tortures brought less pain in the long run because Congress will now take steps to outlaw this kind of military wrongdoing by making sure third parties are always present to protect POWs. This would be a third action, an action by Congress, and it is way too far removed from the original action you were considering. It is too indirect.

So, when weighing benefit to come from the action against the harm, do not dig for an obviously different action to find some benefit.

Stick with the original action. You do not want to say that overall, torturing prisoners is beneficial because we will get new laws. Getting new laws is too far removed from torturing. Getting new laws is a different action with a whole different set of

players, etc. Most importantly, we know torturing overall does great harm. Getting new laws just changes the ethics completely because you changed the subject.

RULE VS ACT UTILITARIANISM. Just to let you know that philosophers discuss this distinction

ACT UTILITARIANS

Act Utilitarians claim that consequences should be judged for each case.

Bentham & Mill were Act Utilitarians (some sources claim Mill was rule utilitarian). In this course, when you do Utilitarian analysis you will be doing Act Utilitarianism. You only need to know the difference between Act Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism for your Midterm Objective Exam and Final Objective Exam.

RULE UTILITARIANS

Rule Utilitarians claim that consequences should be judged in terms of rules that can be applied in general for similar cases.

Rule Utilitarianism seeks to ignore the specific case at hand and its specific consequences by claiming that following rules (or some specific rules) promotes overall good. Rule Utilitarianism was a latter 20th C. attempt to soften utilitarianism or make it look less ruthless.

EXAMPLE: Above we noted the example of the child sacrificed to save hundreds. But we feel there is something cold-hearted and wrong about killing an innocent child to save people. Do we really want to judge actions by crunching numbers: one child vs. many others? Rule utilitarianism would claim that we should look to a general rule: killing people in general is wrong, so we should not kill in this specific case. So, we should not kill one innocent child to save untold innocent people. But that is not the spirit of utilitarianism.

In the end, despite much philosophical persuasion, Rule Utilitarianism is claiming a special utilitarian value to following rules—for the sake of following rules. But in fact, following rules just for the sake of a general belief in following rules rarely serves overall good. You might get a compliant, orderly people, but you would undoubtedly get many people who would like everyone to always follow the rules they set.

In order to judge whether always following a rule would maximize overall good, you will have to look at specific cases of applying that rule. But looking at specific cases is Act Utilitarianism!

(RULE UTILITARIANISM EXAMPLE: lying is always wrong because in the long run everyone is better off if people never lie.)

(ACT UTILITARIANISM REPLY: following rules in every case is always wrong because in the long run everyone is better off if people are allowed to make exceptions to rules.

Another approach to this debate is that Rule Utilitarianism either adds nothing to Act Utilitarianism or looks nothing like Utilitarianism at all.

Act Utilitarianism works because the act utilitarian definition does not specify timeframe. Overall can be overall taking into account distant or closer future. So we ask, if lying now, say lying to government officials accomplishing an end to a war, could be seen to save lives, not much of a stretch to say that a rule to lie can be applied in general for similar cases of ending wars, and to say that this lie would bring the most good overall over time. If it does not fit the individual case (Act Utilitarianism) in terms of benefit to mankind overall for now and for any possible generations to come, then it will not fit Rule Utilitarianism. The problem here is, how general must a rule be in order to apply to a specific case? Does lying in every case violate utilitarianism, or does telling the truth in this kind of case violate utilitarianism?

An ethics of utility that always follows a rule will be one that fails to serve overall good.

So, we will just stick with Act Utilitarianism, and beware of trying too hard to follow general rules or looking to general society. **Lying sometimes serves overall good, even if it usually does not. This is one important way that utilitarianism differs from other ethical theories we will look at.**

EVERYONE COUNTS

In utilitarianism you must weigh the benefit & harm to everyone who might get benefit or harm. Utilitarianism is not just about sheer numbers. Everyone who experiences consequences counts. Each person counts as one person. The benefit to that person might be sacrificed for overall benefit of everyone, but that person does get counted. Even guilty people count, or rather, utilitarianism does not consider guilt or innocence. Utilitarianism does not discount the benefits & harm to people just because they are to blame.

“SOCIETY” does not get counted.

Act Utilitarianism, and rule if it is ethical, is about real flesh and blood human beings & animals, maybe the trees & earth too, but not about society. The abstract concept of society is often used to blur the reality, make the people count less. Utilitarianism is tough to swallow at times in the ways the individual seems sacrificed for overall good. It is even tougher if real people are discounted in the name of an abstract society. As is, we are dividing all the real people into groups. Bentham would have liked us to be able to point and consider every single real human being. Well, we'll have to group, but we do not have to ever make it about society.

BENEFIT/HARM TO COMPANIES RARELY MATTERS:

When it comes to money, utilitarianism rarely makes a call one way or other unless money goes from rich to poor. Only time money is a benefit is if it goes from rich to poor. Only time money is a harm is when it goes from poor to rich.

In a competitive environment, you can never discuss the benefit to any company while ignoring the harm to its competitors. You can never discuss the harm to a company unless you discuss the benefit to its competitors. In a competitive market economy, money just changes hands, balancing out: company x gets \$\$? Then Company y loses \$\$\$. But there are rare exceptions to this general rule that benefit/harm to companies cancels out. If a company has a monopoly that is not harming anyone, then they have no competitors. Facebook currently has such a monopoly. But be careful. You must still consider that those who work in these companies get very little value for, say \$100. compared to that \$100. in the hands of poor people. The one hundred dollars just means more in their lives. There is a point at which you have so much, a few hundred dollars means nothing to you, but it means very much to a poor person.

DO NOT APPEAL TO RIGHTS. DO NOT APPEAL TO ISSUES OF PRIVACY.

Utilitarianism only looks at real consequences of real actions. Privacy is not a consequence. Privacy is an abstract concept of a certain philosophical view, namely, rights. Only the consequences of loss of privacy can be harms, but then, you must frame the loss outside of the abstract conceptual view of rights: data breaches can have consequences and only those possible consequences count, such as losing your money, ridicule, losing your job, identity theft, spouse asking for divorce, being stalked. Those are real consequences, they count under utilitarianism. Privacy is just a state of being isolated. Isolation can be a benefit but it could also be a harm. There is nothing inherent about privacy that makes it either a consequence or a benefit or a harm. Just be careful that you do not slip into rights mentality when you try to show benefits & harms. Never assume something is a benefit because it sounds ethical. Instead you have to discuss real harm.

“DISGRUNTLED” IS NOT A SUFFICIENT HARM.

People are often disgruntled. Indeed, given nothing to be disgruntled about, people will invent something. Utilitarianism cannot control for “upset” or “disgruntled”. Instead, stick with more direct & controllable consequences.

UTILITARIAN (ARGUMENT section of OUTLINE)

1. **DEFINE UTILITARIANISM:** Utilitarianism promotes consequences that bring the greatest benefit and the least harm overall. (just copy and paste definition)
2. State very generally, in one sentence, if the action of the case promotes overall benefit or overall harm.
3. List **all** groups who benefit (a sentence)

4. Write a paragraph for **each group** explaining how they benefit and why
5. List **all** groups who are harmed (a sentence)
6. Write a paragraph for **each group** explaining how they are harmed and why
7. Weigh overall benefit against overall harm