

Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham & John Stuart Mill

MARK Dimmock and Andrew Fisher, *Ethics for A-Level*, Open book Publisher, 2017

➤ **What is Ethics?**

- The scope of ethics is much broader than the realm of law. Ethics extends to all our duties and obligations, virtues and vices, as we interact with each other – whether or not we should lie or steal, whether we should be charitable toward those less fortunate than ourselves, whether we should be forgiving, and how to resolve conflicts of interest when we have conflicting obligations to different persons.
- The general study of goodness.
- The general study of right action.
- Metaethics
- Applied ethics

➤ **The general study of goodness.**

- Minimally, two questions:
- (1) What are the components of a good life?
- (2) What sort of things are good in themselves?
- Raises the issue of intrinsic value vs. instrumental value:
- Intrinsic value: The worth objects have in their own right, independent of their value to any other end.
- Instrumental value: The worth objects have in fulfilling other ends.

➤ **The general study of right action.**

- The principles of right and wrong that govern our choices and pursuits. And Can be understood collectively to constitute a moral code which define the responsibilities of people who live together.
- Deontological Ethics (Kant's categorical imperative)
- Consequentialist Ethics (Mill's utilitarianism)
- Virtue Ethics (Aristotle)
- **Attempts in all three schools to tie moral obligation to something like a claim to intrinsic value.**

Consequentialist Ethics

- *Hedonism*: value (good) is pleasure/happiness

1. Egoism: my happiness is the greatest good

Hedonism was advocated by Epicurus (341-270 BC)

The primary intrinsic good of a person is pleasure/ pleasure is always good and less pleasure (pain) is bad.

1. Utilitarianism: the good is the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people (or perhaps sentient beings)

- Consequentialism, as its name suggests, is the view that normative properties depend only on consequences.
- Which holds that whether an act is morally right depends only on the consequences of that act or of something related to that act

Types of Pleasure

- Wish to have delicious food
 - Winning a lottery
 - Drinking alcohol
 - Palatial Bungalow with heated swimming pool
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- Having good health, Good friendship, Helping others,
 - Solving mathematical problems, Listening to the music, etc.

Utilitarianism

- Bentham is a classical utilitarian who was driven by the desire of social reform
- He was a hedonistic utilitarian. “The value of life lies in the amount of pleasure contained in it.” (Dimmock and Fisher p.13)
- *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.*

Principle of Utility: Maximize ‘good’

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. (Ibid., p.14)

“The good” is simply pleasure



Jeremy Bentham

(5 February 1748– 6 June 1832)



An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1780)

by *Jeremy Bentham*

Promotion of Utility in terms of Pleasure

Bentham himself calls his fundamental axiom a requirement to *promote the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people, in order to act morally*.

The Hedonic Calculus, as suggested by Bentham, is based on assessing possible pleasures

- Intensity
- Duration
- Certainty
- Remoteness (i.e. how far into the future the pleasure is)
- Fecundity (i.e. how likely it is that pleasure will generate other related pleasures)
- Purity (i.e. if any pain will be felt alongside that pleasure)
- Extent (i.e. how many people might be able to share in that pleasure)

John Stuart Mill's Revisions: Utilitarianism



(20 May 1806 – 7 May 1873)

“Happiness” is NOT simply equivalent to pleasure

- The ‘good’ is happiness - a more complex notion, achieved by living a principled and prudent life.

- “lower quality pleasures”
 - shared with other animals – e.g., food, sex
- “higher quality pleasures,”
 - uniquely human, involving our so-called higher faculties

“It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.”

The Principle of Utility

(or Principle of Greatest Happiness) says:

“The greatest happiness of all of those whose interest is in question, is the right and proper, and universally desirable, end of human action.”

The greatest good for the greatest number

The Principle of Utility

“Principle of Utility” performs three vital functions:

- 1) Explains the foundations, and offers justification, for our moral rules, laws, and customs
- 2) Exposes the inadequacy of unjust laws or customs that do NOT promote utility; and
- 3) Offers us a means for resolving conflicts between rules and laws, or deciding vexing cases on which traditional moral rules and laws are silent

Respect life

Don't Steal, ETC.

Do no harm

Variations of Utilitarianism

- I *Act utilitarianism*: we are obligated to do the specific act that produces the greatest amount of happiness (regardless of rules or justice)

Objections:

- consequence calculation is difficult
- the end justifies the means

- I *Rule utilitarianism*: we should follow moral rules that, when acted upon, *generally* produce the greatest amount of happiness

Objections:

- what about when rules conflict?
- in some cases, why not exceptions?

Reply: then why have any theory at all?

So how do you measure good/bad consequences?

- The principle of utility (or Principle of Greatest Happiness) says:
 - *“The greatest happiness of all of those whose interest is in question, is the right and proper, and universally desirable, end of human action.”*
- Happiness can then be looked at either long term or short term, physical pleasure or intellectual happiness
- Should allow everyone affected by the act to “get a vote”
- We already reason like this in many cases
- Act Utilitarian: The principle should be applied to particular acts in particular circumstances
- Rule Utilitarian: An action is right if it conforms to a rule of conduct that has been validated by the principle of utility

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF UTILITARIANISM?

- **IS IT LOGICAL? INTUITIVE?**
 - **IS THIS A MORAL THEORY YOU CAN USE TO MAKE DECISIONS?**
 - Is pleasure vs pain the right metric?
 - **WHAT IS UTILITARIAN REASONING BASED ON?**
 - **CONSEQUENCES – (OUTCOMES) – TELEOLOGICAL**
1. **RIGHT/WRONG DETERMINED BY GOOD/BAD OUTCOME**
 2. **PLEASURE (+) PAIN (-)**
 3. **HUMAN FLOURISHING (+) SUFFERING (-)**