

# Utilitarianism: A Philosophical Introduction

## From Classical Foundations to Contemporary Applications

Brendan Shea, PhD

January 10, 2025

# The Greatest Good

*“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.”*

– John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861)

- This foundational statement captures the essence of **utilitarianism**, emphasizing its focus on consequences rather than rigid rules or duties.
- Mill’s definition revolutionized moral philosophy by providing a systematic framework for ethical decision-making based on measurable outcomes.
- The quote introduces key concepts we’ll explore: **utility**, **happiness**, and the relationship between actions and their consequences.
- Contemporary applications range from healthcare resource allocation during the COVID-19 pandemic to environmental policy decisions affecting future generations.

# Lesson Overview

- We'll trace utilitarianism's development from its ancient precursors in Greek and Chinese philosophy through its systematic formulation by **Jeremy Bentham** and **John Stuart Mill**.
- We'll examine how utilitarianism addresses fundamental questions in ethics: How do we measure happiness? Whose happiness counts? What makes an action morally right or wrong?
- We'll explore modern variations of utilitarian thought, including **preference utilitarianism**, **rule utilitarianism**, and their applications to contemporary issues like global poverty and animal welfare.
- We'll critically evaluate utilitarianism's strengths and limitations through real-world cases, such as the trolley problem and debates over healthcare rationing.
- By the end, you'll understand how utilitarian thinking influences modern policy decisions, from cost-benefit analysis in government to effective altruism in philanthropy.

# Precursors to Utilitarianism: Epicurus (341-270 BCE)

*"We recognize pleasure as the first good innate in us, and from pleasure we begin every act of choice and avoidance, and to pleasure we return again, using the feeling as the standard by which we judge every good."*

– *Epicurus, Letter to Menoeceus*

- Epicurus developed a sophisticated theory of **ethical hedonism** that distinguished between different types of pleasures and their relative values in creating a good life.
- He argued that the highest pleasure was **ataraxia** (tranquility), achieved through philosophical reflection and moderate living—an early version of qualitative distinctions later crucial to Mill's utilitarianism.
- Unlike popular misconceptions, Epicurean philosophy emphasized intellectual pleasures over physical ones, anticipating Mill's distinction between "higher" and "lower" pleasures.
- His ideas about measuring and comparing different types of pleasure and pain created a framework that would later influence utilitarian thinking about welfare and well-being.

# Precursors to Utilitarianism: Mozi (470-391 BCE)

*“Universal love is really the way of the sage-kings. It is what brings the greatest benefit to the people and the way to become wealthy and secure.”*

– Mozi, *Universal Love*

- Mozi developed the concept of **jianai** (universal love or impartial care), arguing that moral behavior should benefit all people equally rather than favoring family or clan.
- His emphasis on **practical consequences** over ritual and tradition parallels utilitarian rejection of traditional moral rules in favor of measuring actual outcomes.
- Mozi's arguments for evaluating customs and policies based on their benefit to society anticipates modern cost-benefit analysis and evidence-based policymaking.
- His view that government should promote the welfare of all people equally, not just the elite, foreshadows utilitarian arguments for democratic reforms and universal suffrage.

# Precursors to Utilitarianism: David Hume (1711-1776)

*“Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”*

– David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

- Hume's **moral sentimentalism** established that moral judgments are based on feelings of approval and disapproval rather than pure reason, influencing later utilitarian thinking about the role of happiness and welfare.
- His concept of **utility** as the basis for approving of virtuous actions provided a crucial bridge between earlier moral philosophy and systematic utilitarianism.
- Hume's empirical approach to ethics, studying how moral judgments actually work in practice rather than deriving them from abstract principles, influenced both Bentham and Mill's methodologies.
- His analysis of the relationship between individual and social utility helped lay the groundwork for understanding how personal and public interests can align, a key concern in modern utilitarian thought.

# Jeremy Bentham: Biography (1748-1832)

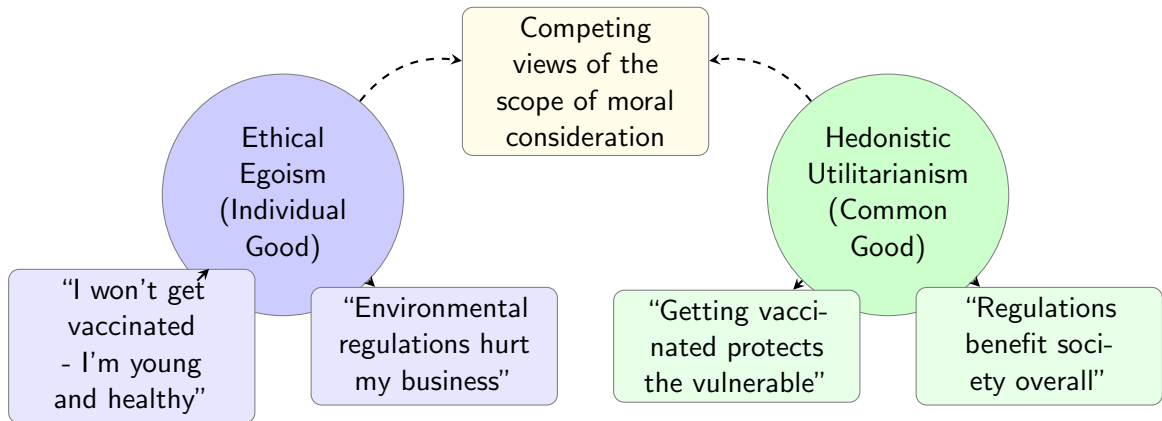
- Born into a wealthy London family, Bentham showed extraordinary intellectual gifts from an early age, reading serious works of history in French at age three and studying Latin by age four at Queen's College, Oxford.
- After training as a lawyer, Bentham became disillusioned with the English legal system's complexity and arbitrariness, leading him to develop systematic principles for legal and social reform based on the **principle of utility**.
- His work influenced numerous reforms in 19th century Britain, including the Reform Act of 1832, prison reform, and the development of civil service examinations—demonstrating how philosophical principles can drive practical social change.
- Bentham practiced what he preached regarding utility: he left his body to medical science and had his preserved skeleton displayed at University College London, where it remains today as the "Auto-Icon"—exemplifying his belief in maximizing utility even after death.

# Bentham's Utilitarianism: Core Principles

- Bentham established the first systematic formulation of utilitarianism through his **principle of utility**: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure... they govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think."
- He developed the **felicific calculus** as a method for measuring pleasure and pain, considering seven dimensions: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent—creating an early framework for systematic policy analysis.
- Bentham advocated for **radical equality**, arguing that "each to count for one, nobody for more than one," a principle that continues to influence debates about economic inequality, animal welfare, and global development.
- His insistence on measurable outcomes and empirical evidence in moral reasoning anticipated modern approaches to public policy, from cost-benefit analysis in environmental regulation to quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) in healthcare decision-making.



# Comparing Ethical Frameworks: Egoism vs. Hedonistic Utilitarianism



# Problems with Bentham's View

- The **quantification problem**: Bentham's felicific calculus assumes we can measure and compare different types of pleasure and pain with precision, but how do we really compare the pleasure of eating ice cream with the pleasure of reading poetry?
- The **aggregation problem**: Simply adding up pleasures and pains across individuals ignores questions of justice and fair distribution—should we sacrifice one person's fundamental rights to produce slightly more happiness for many others?
- The **motivation problem**: Bentham's psychological hedonism (that pleasure and pain are the only motives for action) seems to conflict with examples of genuine altruism and moral commitment—consider healthcare workers risking their lives during pandemics.
- The **complexity problem**: The felicific calculus becomes impossibly complex when we try to account for all consequences of actions across time and space—illustrated by contemporary challenges in climate policy and artificial intelligence governance.
- These critiques led to important refinements in utilitarian theory, particularly Mill's qualitative distinction between higher and lower pleasures.

# John Stuart Mill: Biography (1806-1873)

- Mill's early life represented an experiment in **utilitarian education**, as his father James Mill and Jeremy Bentham designed an intensive educational program to create a philosophical prodigy, teaching him Greek at three and economics by age thirteen.
- His famous **mental crisis** at age twenty led him to question pure Benthamite rationalism, discovering through poetry and art that human happiness requires both intellectual and emotional development—a insight central to his later philosophical work.
- As a **public intellectual**, Mill worked at the East India Company while writing influential works on logic, economics, and political theory, including *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) and *On Liberty* (1859).
- Mill's career as a **social reformer** in Parliament (1865-1868) demonstrated his commitment to practical applications of utilitarian principles, especially in promoting women's suffrage and workers' rights.

# Harriet Taylor Mill: Biography (1807-1858)

- Harriet Taylor Mill developed sophisticated **utilitarian arguments for equality**, particularly in her essay "The Enfranchisement of Women" (1851), which argued that social progress requires developing the talents of all individuals regardless of gender.
- Her concept of **cooperative social progress** emphasized how equality and individual development contribute to collective welfare, influencing both feminist theory and democratic socialism.
- The Mills' **intellectual partnership** challenged Victorian conventions about gender roles while demonstrating their philosophical commitment to judging actions by consequences rather than social rules.
- Her work on **economic justice** argued that worker cooperatives and profit-sharing could align individual and collective interests—ideas that continue to influence discussions of workplace democracy and economic inequality.

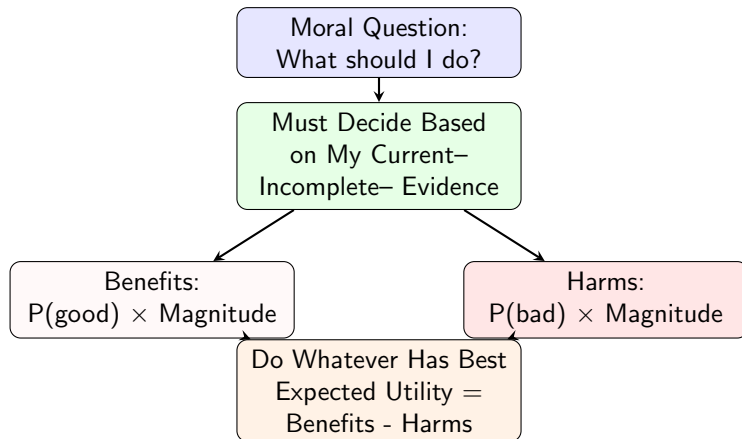
# Mill's Utilitarianism: Theory

- Mill introduced the crucial distinction between **higher** and **lower pleasures**, arguing that some forms of happiness are inherently more valuable because they engage our uniquely human capacities for intellectual and moral development.
- His concept of **competent judges**—those who have experienced both types of pleasure—provides a method for establishing qualitative differences: "It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."
- Mill developed **indirect utilitarianism**, arguing that utility is often best served by following general rules and protecting individual rights rather than calculating the consequences of each action.
- His **harm principle** states that power can only be rightfully exercised over individuals to prevent harm to others—a principle that continues to influence debates about personal freedom versus collective welfare.

# Mill's Utilitarianism: Practical Applications

- Mill developed powerful **antislavery arguments** based on utility, contending that slavery not only directly harmed its victims but corrupted the moral character of slave-owners and society at large—showing how utilitarian thinking supports fundamental human rights.
- His groundbreaking work "**The Subjection of Women**" (1869) argued that gender equality would dramatically increase human welfare by developing women's talents and improving relationships between men and women—ideas that helped launch the feminist movement.
- In economics, Mill advocated for **progressive taxation**, **worker cooperatives**, and limits on inheritance to reduce inequality. He argued that free markets should serve human welfare rather than being ends in themselves—principles still debated in discussions of economic justice.
- As a Member of Parliament, Mill championed **proportional representation**, arguing that true democracy requires protecting minority viewpoints and ensuring all groups have a political voice—anticipating contemporary debates about electoral reform.

# Making Decisions Using Act Utilitarianism



Key Factors: Probability of outcomes, magnitude of effects, quality of evidence, number of people affected

# Contemporary Utilitarianism: From Sidgwick to Singer

- **Henry Sidgwick** (1838-1900) offered sophisticated defenses of utilitarianism in his work *The Methods of Ethics*, developing the concept of **rational benevolence** as the foundation for impartial consideration of everyone's welfare.
- **R.M. Hare** (1919-2002) developed **preference utilitarianism**, which measures utility in terms of preference satisfaction rather than mental states like pleasure—allowing utilitarianism to better handle cases involving unconscious beings or future persons.
- **Derek Parfit** (1942-2017) explored how utilitarianism addresses questions of **personal identity** and **future generations**, showing how our ordinary moral intuitions often fail when dealing with large numbers or long time scales.
- **Peter Singer** (1946-) has applied utilitarian reasoning to practical ethics, developing influential arguments about **animal welfare**, **global poverty**, and **effective altruism** that have sparked real-world movements for change.



# Types of Utilitarianism: Key Distinctions

- **Act vs. Rule Utilitarianism:** Act utilitarianism evaluates each action by its consequences, while **rule utilitarianism** judges actions by the consequences of everyone following rules that would produce the best outcomes—similar to how traffic laws work better when universally followed.
- **Hedonistic vs. Preference Utilitarianism:** Hedonistic versions focus on pleasure/pain, while **preference utilitarianism** considers the satisfaction of preferences—helping address cases like a patient's preferences about end-of-life care even when unconscious.
- **Total vs. Average Utilitarianism:** **Total utilitarianism** aims to maximize the total amount of welfare, while **average utilitarianism** focuses on the average level—leading to different conclusions about population ethics and future generations.
- **Maximizing vs. Satisficing:** **Maximizing utilitarianism** requires the best possible outcome, while **satisficing** accepts any outcome above some threshold—reflecting debates about how demanding morality should be.

# Application: Global Poverty and Effective Altruism

- Contemporary utilitarians argue that we have strong moral obligations to help the global poor because we can save lives at relatively low cost to ourselves—for example, providing malaria nets or deworming treatments can save a life for a few thousand dollars.
- The **effective altruism** movement applies utilitarian reasoning to charitable giving, using evidence and analysis to identify the most cost-effective ways to do good—leading to organizations like GiveWell that evaluate charities' impact per dollar.
- This approach challenges traditional ideas about charity by suggesting we should donate based on effectiveness rather than emotional connection, leading to debates about **cause prioritization** between areas like global health, animal welfare, and existential risk.
- Critics argue this approach is too coldly calculating, but utilitarians respond that being more effective at helping others is the truly compassionate choice—noting that sentimental giving often fails to maximize positive impact.

# Application: Animal Welfare and Factory Farming

- Utilitarians argue that the capacity to suffer, not species membership, determines moral status—meaning that factory farming creates massive amounts of suffering that we are morally obligated to prevent.
- Contemporary research on **animal consciousness** and **pain perception** strengthens these arguments by showing that animals experience rich emotional lives and can suffer in ways similar to humans—making their welfare a pressing moral concern.
- The scale of factory farming (over 70 billion land animals killed annually) makes this potentially one of the largest sources of suffering in the world from a utilitarian perspective, leading to arguments for vegetarianism and support for alternative proteins.
- This application shows how utilitarian thinking can lead to radical conclusions by following the logic of minimizing suffering consistently—challenging common practices we often take for granted.

# Contemporary Applications of Utilitarian Analysis

Domain	Key Issues	Utilitarian Approach
Global Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Extreme poverty</li><li>● Economic development</li><li>● Aid effectiveness</li></ul>	Maximize welfare per dollar through evidence-based interventions (e.g., direct cash transfers, deworming programs, malaria prevention)
Public Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Healthcare rationing</li><li>● Vaccine distribution</li><li>● Research priorities</li></ul>	Allocate resources to maximize QALYs (Quality-Adjusted Life Years), prioritizing interventions with greatest impact per cost
Animal Welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Factory farming</li><li>● Wild animal suffering</li><li>● Research ethics</li></ul>	Consider welfare of all sentient beings; focus on scale of suffering in industrial agriculture and potential interventions
Future Risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Climate change</li><li>● AI safety</li><li>● Existential risk</li></ul>	Account for long-term effects and potential impacts on future generations; emphasize prevention of catastrophes

# Application: Medical Ethics and Euthanasia

- Utilitarians approach end-of-life decisions by weighing the **quality of life**, considering factors like suffering, autonomy, and the preferences of both patients and their loved ones—leading to arguments for both passive and active euthanasia in certain cases.
- Peter Singer argues that the traditional **doctrine of the sanctity of life** should be replaced with a more nuanced view based on characteristics that make life valuable to the person living it—including consciousness, ability to interact with others, and capacity for enjoyment.
- This approach has influenced real-world policies, such as the Netherlands' carefully regulated euthanasia system, which requires **unbearable suffering** with **no prospect of improvement** and **persistent, well-considered requests** from the patient.
- The utilitarian framework helps address complex cases like advanced dementia by focusing on both **current experiential interests** and **previously expressed preferences**—though this can lead to challenging conflicts between past and present selves.

# Criticisms of Utilitarianism, Part 1

- The **separateness of persons** objection (Rawls): Utilitarianism wrongly treats society as a single entity whose pleasures and pains can be summed, ignoring that each person lives a separate life—potentially justifying severe sacrifices of some for the benefit of others.
- The **demandingness** objection: Utilitarian ethics seems to require that we constantly maximize welfare, leaving no room for personal projects or special relationships—consider Peter Singer’s argument that we should give away most of our income to help the global poor.
- The **integrity** objection (Bernard Williams): Utilitarianism alienates us from our deepest commitments and personal relationships by requiring that we always be ready to abandon them for the greater good—making it psychologically unsustainable.
- The **calculation problem**: We often can’t reliably predict the long-term consequences of our actions, making utilitarian calculations practically impossible—especially for complex issues like climate change or artificial intelligence development.

## Criticisms of Utilitarianism, Part 2

- The **justice and rights** objection: Utilitarianism might justify violating individual rights if doing so maximizes overall welfare—for instance, killing one healthy person to distribute their organs to five others who need transplants.
- The **experience machine** objection (Nozick): If only pleasure matters, we should all plug into machines that give us perfect simulated experiences—suggesting that other things like authenticity and achievement have non-utilitarian value.
- The **special obligations** problem: Utilitarianism struggles to account for special duties we have to family, friends, and fellow citizens—it seems to require treating strangers' interests exactly like those of our own children.
- The **incommensurability** problem: Some values or types of pleasure/pain seem fundamentally incomparable—how do we weigh artistic achievement against economic growth, or spiritual fulfillment against physical pleasure?

# Wrap Up: Key Themes in Utilitarian Thought

In examining utilitarianism from its classical foundations through its contemporary applications, several key themes emerge that help us understand both its enduring appeal and its challenges:

- The persistent tension between impartial welfare maximization and our intuitions about justice, rights, and special obligations shows how utilitarianism pushes us to examine our moral assumptions.
- The evolution from Bentham's hedonistic calculus to modern frameworks like QALYs demonstrates how utilitarian thinking drives the development of practical tools for ethical decision-making.
- Contemporary applications in areas like effective altruism show how utilitarian principles can guide concrete actions while raising challenging questions about moral demands.
- The ongoing debate between different versions of utilitarianism (act vs. rule, hedonistic vs. preference) reflects broader questions about how to balance systematic ethical thinking with practical reality.



# Discussion Questions, Part 1

Consider these questions about utilitarianism's theoretical foundations:

- Imagine you're a hospital administrator deciding how to allocate scarce medical resources. How would different versions of utilitarianism (hedonistic, preference, rule) approach this decision? What factors would each consider most important?
- Bernard Williams argues that utilitarianism alienates us from our personal projects and relationships. Consider a case where maximizing utility would require abandoning a close friend in need. How might a utilitarian respond to this criticism?
- Examine the claim that we can't reliably predict the long-term consequences of our actions. Does this undermine utilitarianism as a practical ethical framework? How might different types of utilitarianism handle this challenge?
- Looking at Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures, are there meaningful ways to compare qualitatively different experiences? What criteria might we use?

## Discussion Questions, Part 2

Explore these questions about contemporary applications:

- Peter Singer argues that we have strong obligations to help the global poor. Consider your own consumption choices: how would strict utilitarian reasoning change your lifestyle? Is such demanding morality sustainable?
- Analyze factory farming through different utilitarian lenses (hedonistic vs. preference, act vs. rule). How do different approaches weigh economic benefits against animal welfare? What policies would each version support?
- Consider autonomous vehicles programmed with utilitarian decision-making principles. Should they prioritize minimizing total casualties even if that means sometimes sacrificing their passengers? What does this tell us about utilitarianism and individual rights?
- How should utilitarians weigh present versus future welfare? Consider cases like climate change or AI development where actions today could affect millions of future lives.

- **Act Utilitarianism:** The view that the rightness of an action depends solely on its consequences compared to available alternatives in that specific situation.
- **Rule Utilitarianism:** The view that right actions are those that conform to rules which, if generally adopted, would maximize utility.
- **Hedonistic Utilitarianism:** The version of utilitarianism that measures utility purely in terms of pleasure and pain (as developed by Bentham).
- **Preference Utilitarianism:** The version that measures utility in terms of preference satisfaction rather than mental states (developed by Hare and Singer).
- **Felicific Calculus:** Bentham's systematic method for measuring pleasure and pain according to intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent.

- **Higher and Lower Pleasures:** Mill's distinction between pleasures that engage our distinctively human faculties (higher) and those we share with animals (lower).
- **Quality-Adjusted Life Year (QALY):** A measure used in healthcare economics that combines quantity of life with quality of life, rating a year of perfect health as 1 and death as 0.
- **Effective Altruism:** A movement applying utilitarian principles to charitable giving, using evidence and analysis to maximize positive impact per dollar.
- **Negative Utilitarianism:** The view that reducing suffering is more morally important than increasing happiness.
- **Expected Value Theory:** The approach of making decisions by multiplying the value of possible outcomes by their probabilities.