Ch 4. Utilitarianism and Animals

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In this chapter, we’ll be taking a close look at the ethical theory of **utilitarianism.** In many ways, this is probably the “simplest” ethical theory, and it can be very useful, especially when it comes to making “big picture” decisions (for example, in trying to decide which government policy/law is the “right one.”). Then, we’ll be turning to a utilitarian argument about our duties to animals (should we eat them?).

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# Does “Being Good” Mean “Making People Happy”?

In this lesson, we’ll be looking at an ethical theory called **utilitarianism.** More specifically, we’ll be looking at the version of this theory defended by **John Stuart Mill (**1806-1873), important British philosopher, economist, and politician. Mill’s theory was an expansion on an earlier version of the theory proposed by his family friend and mentor **Jeremy Bentham** (1748 – 1832).

Both Bentham and Mill were strongly associated with liberal, democratic politics. Mill was a vocal critic of slavery, an early proponent of women’s rights, and a strong advocate of government programs for education, health care, and assistance to the poor. He thought the government should protect the rights of individuals to lead their lives as they wished, so long as they didn’t harm anyone. He served as a member of British parliament, and also wrote on technical issues concerning scientific methodology, especially as they related to economics. His best known works includes *The Principles of Political Economy,* “On Liberty,” “On the Subjection of Women,” and “Utilitarianism.” He often credited his long-time friend (and eventual wife, after her first husband died), **Harriet Taylor Mill** (1807-1858)as being something like a “coauthor” of his books.

## What is Ethical Theory? What is the Role of Theory in Practical Choices?

An **ethical theory** provides an answer the general question “Under what conditions is an action ethically OK?” So, for example, consider the following simple theories:

* **Divine command theory** states that “an action is ethically OK if and only God commands it.”
* **Ethical egoism** states that “an action is ethically OK for subject S if and only if that action maximizes S’s *personal* welfare.”
* **Cultural relativism** states that “an action is ethically OK in culture C if and only the relevant people in C (the majority, the rulers, etc.) approve of that action.”
* **Subjectivism** states that “an action is OK for subject S if and only if that action is consistent with the values that S has chosen for him- or herself.”

These relatively simple ethical theories have usually been rejected by people writing on ethics. (However, more complex versions of these theories are still alive and well.) Mill argues that ethical theories work in something like the opposite way as scientific theories do. Here’s the basic idea:

* In science, decisions to accept particular pieces of evidence usually come *before* decisions about whether to accept a general theory. So, for example, scientists often agree on what the evidence is, and most of the work concerns finding a theory that can make sense of it.
  + Example: Most scientists working in public health agree that there is a statistical correlation between exercise and lifespan (particular evidence). They disagree, however, on how this correlation can be explained (general theory). A person who didn’t accept the statistical data in the first place couldn’t even participate in this conversation.
* In ethics, by contrast, one must often make decisions about which theory to accept *before* one can make particular ethical judgments. Much of the work concerning ethics involves applying an ethical theory to particular cases.
  + Example: All utilitarians agree that the goal of government policy should be to maximize well-being of all citizens. They may disagree, however, on which policies actually accomplish this (for example, concerning drug policies, gun control, or assistance to those in need). A person who rejected utilitarianism, however, couldn’t even participate in this conversation.

Mill’s goal in “Utilitarianism” is to present a general ethical theory that he thinks we can use to solve practical ethical problems (concerning both political and personal morality). Mill’s theory has proven remarkably popular, especially among economists and political philosopher. As we’ll discover, however, not everyone is willing to accept that Mill’s theory is the correct one.

## What is Utilitarianism? What is Happiness?

Mill defines *happiness* and *utilitarianism* as follows:

The creed [utilitarianism] 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. … [P]leasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain.

The basic ideas can be expressed as follows:

* **Utilitarianism** is the theory that an action is ethically OK if and only if maximizes (or at least “promotes”) overall happiness. *Nothing else matters to whether or not an action is ethically OK.* Utilitarianism is the most popular and influential form of a more general ethical theory called **consequentialism**, which holds that whether or not an action is morally OK depends solely on the consequences of the action.
* Utilitarianism is opposed to two other prominent moral theories: deontology (which holds that moral actions adhere to certain rules) and virtue ethics (which hold that moral actions are those that would be chosen by perfectly virtuous actors).
* For Mill, **happiness** simply means “pleasure” or “the absence of pain.” Mill holds that happiness is the *only* thing that is intrinsically valuable for humans (or for any other sentient beings). Everything else that is valuable (art, knowledge, relationships, and so on) are (instrumentally) valuable to the extent that they promote happiness.

Mill recognizes that different things make different people happy (or unhappy). Given that we can’t make *everyone* happy, however, we need to have some way of *comparing* how much different sorts of happiness “count for.” Mill’s general solution to this problem is basically this: “If you are trying to figure whether action A or B promote happiness better, ask someone who has experienced both, and find out which one she prefers.” He says “It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.” Here’s the basic idea:

* **Bodily (lower) pleasures** are those humans share with lower animals (sex, food, warmth, avoiding pain, and so on). Mill emphasizes that such things are morally relevant, and that we ought to promote them (in both humans and animals). However, he does *not* think that we ought to try to maximize these at the expense of mental pleasures**.** (So, for example, Mill would think it would be ethically wrong to make everyone “happy” by giving them super-powerful drugs that filled them with continuous ecstasy.) By their nature, these pleasures tend to be of shorter duration than mental pleasures, and the mindless pursuit of them can easily lead to conflict with others (and hence, to an increase in overall suffering).
* **Mental (higher) pleasures** concern the sorts of activities that most human would say make them truly happy: academic activities, sports and games, close relationships with others, and so on. Mill thinks that, after people’s basic physical needs have been met, we ought to focus on maximizing these pleasures because (1) most people who have experienced both sorts of pleasure say they prefer these and (2) these pleasures tend to be more stable and long-lasting, and enjoying them can often have good effects on *other* people.

Remember: Utilitarianism says that ethical actions maximize *everyone’s* happiness (including not just humans, but all sentient beings). It does NOT say that ethical actions will end up maximizing your *own* happiness (that position is called *ethical egoism*).

## Act Utilitarianism in Practice

Mill’s teacher, Jeremy Bentham, defended a version of utilitarianism that’s now known as **act utilitarianism.** On this theory, a morally right action is defined as whatever action maximizes happiness (or, equivalently) minimizes suffering for everyone affected by it. At points, Mill seems to agree with this. In other places, however, his writing suggests a slightly different version of utilitarianism known as **rule utilitarianism,** which holds that we should do these sorts of utility calculation only to figure out what sort of rules, we should live by, and then just follow these rules (instead of trying to figure it out on a case-to-case basis). In either case, however, utilitarians think that morality/immorality of action will depend on the following things:

1. **The scope of the action.** To begin with, we need to figure out every begin (human or animal) who level of utility or happiness could possibly be affected by the action. This includes both those who are affected by something we do (a person who benefits from our giving them money) and things we DON’T do (an animal benefits from us seating a salad instead of a burger). Utilitarians do NOT distinguish between things that you “cause” and things that you simply “allow” to happen. A utilitarian sees no (theoretical) difference between you shooting someone, and you simply failing to stop *someone else* from shooting someone (supposing there was some way for you to do so).
2. **How good or bad each possible outcome would be.** Once, we’ve figured out the scope, we need to figure out how large the likely effects on these beings will be (in terms of how much change it makes to their lives, and levels of utility), and whether this change is positive or negative. Many actions will help some people/animals and hurt some others. So, for example, if I am deciding whether to give money to charity, I’ll have to consider both how much I stand to lose by donating (how much happiness am I “giving up”?), and how much the other person stands to gain.
3. **The probability of each outcome.** Except in a few special cases, we can almost never say with *certainty* how our actions will affect the lives of others. What we do instead is consider how probable various outcomes. So, for example, let’s say I think that I am considering telling a lie to Jones in order to spare him pain about something, and I think there is 90% chance, he’ll never find out (and if he doesn’t find out, he’ll have +1 happiness). However, there is a 10% chance he will find out, and it will ruin his life (-20 happiness). This means that, over all, the **expected utility** (defined as “the sum of the utility of every possible outcome each multiplied by the probability of its occurrence”). of lying is: +1 \*0.9 – 20 \* .1 = -1.9. This means that lying has a negative expected utility. Does this mean we shouldn’t do it? Maybe. But figuring this will depend on what the alternative courses of action are (sometimes, *every* alternative will have negative expected utility, which means that we’ll simply have to choose the smallest number).
4. **We need to do this for *every possible action,* and choose the *best one.*** At any given moment, utilitarians hold that we are required to do the *best* action. This means that we need to think of all the possible actions, their possible scopes, the effects, probabilities, etc., and choose the single action with the highest expected utility. Does this mean we should just stop everything, and simply sit and think all of the time? No! After all, thinking is itself an action, and isn’t always the action with the highest expected utility (since the time wasted thinking could have been spent doing something to help people).

Most act utilitarians (including Mill himself) argue that we should only rarely stop to “calculate utilities” in this sort of way. Instead, they think that, for the vast majority of life, we can follow easy-to-remember rules (be nice to people, don’t hurt them, be generous, etc.), since this precisely what promotes overall utility. Utilitarian calculations come into play only when it seems like there is a genuine question over what is right or wrong. For Mill, this meant that utilitarianism had a big role to play in setting political/economic/public health decisions, but not as much a one in private life. Modern utilitarians have claimed that utilitarianism has a role to play in private life, too (though they agree that we shouldn’t be calculating utilities).

## Objections to Utilitarianism

There are a number of common objections to utilitarianism. Here are a few of the most important:

* **Problems with measurement and prediction of utility.** According to utilitarianism, in order to figure out what the right thing to do is, you need to know how to measure happiness/suffering, at least in some general sense (murder is worse than assault is worse than being left alone), AND you need to be able to make somewhat reliable predictions about how your actions will affect these sorts of things (e.g., “if I give Sauron the ring of power, that will decrease utility, so I shouldn’t do it.”). Some critics have argued that this is often impossible, at least for the sorts of actions that individuals are often concerned about (“Should I lie to Jane?”). Utilitarians have replied that, in many case, it ISN’T difficult to do these things (so, for example, many contemporary utilitarians have argued that things like avoiding eating meat and contributing more money to charity almost certainly promote utility).
* **Utilitarianism is wrong that “happiness” is the only thing that matters.** Some critics have argued that utilitarianism’s claim that “happiness is the only intrinsic good” makes human life out to unrealistically “shallow.” Mill has two basic responses to this. First, he points out that he agrees with these critics that things such as self-sacrifice, courage, intelligence, love, creativity, etc. are super-important, but argues the *reason* they are important is because they promote human happiness. Second, Mill has a very broad of “happiness”—he’s will to count “happiness” as whatever it is that humans (and other sentient animals) value in life.
* **Utilitarianism is too demanding for ordinary humans (the “Moral Saints” objection).** As opposed to other moral theories, utilitarianism can seem all-consuming. For example, utilitarianism would seem to entail that, whenever we have extra money beyond that needed to live, we should give it to charity (since this money could be used to feed the truly hungry). Mill doesn’t directly respond to this, but does note that utilitarianism is theory about which actions are MORAL and not about our MOTIVATIONS for doing these actions. In general, Mill thinks that capitalist economies (which are driven by self-interest) are often a great way of maximizing happiness, so long as the government makes sure to take care of things like education, health care, feeding the poor, etc. (Mill is very optimistic about the power of a well-informed democratic government to improve the lives of those who are worst off).
* **“Basic moral rights” are, at best, rules of thumb.** Both J.S. and Harriet Mill were strong defenders of the legal rights of women, African Americans, religious minorities, and (in general) the rights of people to disagree with the government (and to say/do things that offended and annoyed their neighbors) without being tortured, killed, publicly shamed, etc. Mill is even recognized as an important inspiration for modern “liberals” and “libertarians,” who think that these sorts of rights are the basis of political order. However, according to utilitarianism, these sorts of rights should be honored *only* if doing so led to the greater good; if not, we should simply ignore them. This means that, if we decide that it would be for the “greater good” to violate a particular person’s rights, too bad for that person. Mill himself seemed to take something like this view when it came to British colonies like India and Ireland, where he approved of British military control, since these places weren’t yet “ready” for full political independence. (At the end of his life, Mill did seem to have some second thoughts as the British began taking colonies in Africa, and acting in ways that seemed blatantly contrary to utilitarianism).
* A more general version of this problem: Utilitarianism can lend itself to abuse by people who *think* they are acting for “the greater good” and use this as an excuse to mistreat people.

## Review Questions

1. Suppose that you are given an opportunity to work for a chemical weapons manufacturer, and that you are opposed to such weapons. It pays good money, and your family is OK with it. Further suppose that (a) if you take the job, you will not be especially hard-working, and will only churn out 5 weapons a year and (b) if you turn down the job, a chemical-weapons fanatic will get it, and she will churn out 25 weapons a year. What would a utilitarian advise you to do? What do you think?
2. Suppose that a madman has captured you along with 20 other people. For whatever reason, he likes you, and has decided to release you. Before you run off, he presents you with a choice: (a) if you agree to kill one of the other hostages, he will let the other 19 go and (b) if you refuse, he will kill all 20. What do you do?
3. One real-life application of utilitarian ethics occurred during the Black Plague. Many cities (such as Florence) quarantined the sick, but suffered death tolls of >50%. Milan, however, began shooting strangers on site, and quarantining entire neighborhoods the second a single person showed symptoms (this often led to everyone in the neighborhood dying). Milan’s death toll was around 10%. What city would rather live in? Which policy would you adopt, if you were in charge of a city?

# How Should We Treat Non-Human Animals? Singer’s Utilitarian Account

*“To protest about bullfighting in Spain, the eating of dogs in South Korea, or the slaughter of baby seals in Canada while continuing to eat eggs from hens who have spent their lives crammed into cages, or veal from calves who have been deprived of their mothers, their proper diet, and the freedom to lie down with their legs extended, is like denouncing apartheid in South Africa while asking your neighbors not to sell their houses to blacks.” – Peter Singer, Animal Liberation (1975)*

Most people would (hopefully!) acknowledge that it would be morally wrong to eat a human, or to use a human in a painful experiment for cosmetics. So why do most people think it is OK to do these things to nonhuman animals like pigs, cows, or chickens? In this lesson, we’ll look at a famous argument that “**speciesism**” (discrimination against animals) is immoral for the exact same reasons that racism and sexism are immoral. This argument is closely based on that given by Peter Singer (who is probably the world’s most influential utilitarian philosopher).

To begin with, though, a little background. Most of the current debate about non-human animals (both pro- and against) assumes a few factual premises, which we won’t really be talking about much. While all of these assumptions can be (and have been!) challenged, they represent something like the scientific “consensus.”

* **Are meat or dairy needed for health?** With some exceptions, eating animal products does not seem to provide any health benefits over being vegan, vegetarian, or pescatarian. This is supported by the current nutrition guidelines in countries like the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. Many long-term studies have suggested that these diets are (somewhat) healthier than “standard” Western diets.
* **How does buying meat or dairy impact other *humans?*** Using animal products for food is, at best, neutral with respect to welfare for other humans. So, for example, buying beef helps ranchers by supporting them economically. However, it has a negative impact on the environment (through methane emissions, and by leading to deforestation). Livestock (especially pigs and chickens) are also a main source of human disease (hence the worry about the overuse of antibiotics in raising livestock).
* **Are humans *made* to eat meat?** Like other higher primates (chimps, gorillas, etc.), humans have evolved as meat-eating omnivores. However, humans (again like other primates) have also evolved to have an instinctive fear and a violent dislike of “outsiders” (which relates to racism) and often engage in violent sex (which relates to rape and sexism). So, care needs to be taken when appealing to evolution in arguments about morality. The fact that we were “made” to do something doesn’t necessarily mean we should do it.
* **Is animal experimentation necessary?** If experimentation on animals were to be outlawed, this would almost certainly significantly hinder scientific and medical research. For example, most drug testing involves tests on non-human mammals (such as rats).

By themselves, these facts are *morally neutral—*they don’t tell us anything about the moral status of non-human animals. In the rest of the section, we’ll be focusing mostly on the moral issues.

## Liberation movements, Intuitions, and Equal Rights

According to Singer, a **liberation movement** “demands an expansion of our moral horizons or reinterpretation of the basic moral principle of *equality*.” The two most important recent examples are (1) the women’s liberation movement and (2) the campaign to end racial segregation. Singer wants to argue for “animal liberation.” Here are two important lessons:

* **You can’t always trust your “feelings” (or “intuitions”) about inequality.** White men (on average) once thought it was absurd to free slaves, absurd to give the women the vote, and absurd to end segregation-based policies. We now widely recognize that they were wrong. The moral: If you think that the members of a certain group don’t deserve moral standing, you need an *argument.* Your feelings about the matter are not generally a reliable guide.
* **“Equal rights” is a misleading phrase.** While liberation movements often argue for “equal rights,” this can be misleading. For example, many women have argued for a right to legalized abortion. Men have no need for this right. Similarly, Singer doesn’t argue that animals should have the “right to vote”, or “right to free speech.” What he wants to argue is that non-human animals (and mammals in particular) deserve moral consideration—for example, it would be wrong to eat them simply because they “taste good.”

## What do you Mean by Moral Equality? Why are Racism and Sexism Wrong?

According to Singer, one cannot consistently think that sexism and racism is wrong, and also hold that speciesism is morally OK. This is because all three violate **moral equality.** But what does “moral equality” mean? Singer discusses several common definitions, and argues that they *fail* to show why racism or sexism or wrong (and thus, should not be used).

**Bad Proposal 1: Moral equality requires equality *in all respects.***According to one group of thinkers, the reason that racism and sexism are wrong is that women and minorities are (on average) equal to white men in every respect. They think that *this*  is the reason that every human should have the same rights. Non-human animals, by contrast, do not deserve these rights, since they aren’t equal to human in every respect (for example, non-human animals aren’t as smart as humans).

* Objection 1: There are all sorts of ways in which people differ, and these differences entail moral differences. For example, women can get pregnant, and men cannot. Conditions like diabetes vary in prevalence according to race. These differences entail moral differences with regards to things like the sort of health care a person needs.
* Objection 2: If moral equality requires “factual” equality, then a society which discriminates against the developmentally disabled (or just anyone with a low IQ) would be perfectly OK. Singer thinks that this is obviously wrong, and expects that most people will agree.
* Objection 3: This means that sexism and racism *would* be OK *if* science discovered race- or sex-based difference in IQ. Singer notes that racism and sexism would still be immoral even if we did discover small statistical differences between groups. Again, this seems like a bad consequence.

For this reasons, Singer concludes that “moral equality” CANNOT require “equality in all respects.”

**Bad Proposal 2: Moral equality requires “inherent human dignity.”** According to another group of thinkers, the reason that racism and sexism are wrong is that every human has inherent “dignity” that requires equal treatment. Non-human animals don’t have this.

* Objection: This begs the question. A defender of this proposal needs to answer questions like “*Why* do all humans have this dignity?” or “*Why* do people with extreme cognitive impairments have higher moral status than chimps?” This is the same sort of logic which was used to justify sexism and racism—“Men have an inherent dignity that women lack…” or “The white race has a certain dignity that other races don’t have…” If we reject these claims, we need to careful when considering similar claims about humans/animas.

**Singer’s Proposal: Moral equality requires equality of consideration.** The reason that racism and sexism are wrong is that women and minorities have *interests,* just like white men. In general, any being that can feel pleasure and pain has an *interest* in avoiding pain and achieving pleasure (among other things). Moral equality requires that we treat all beings’ interests equally. (This doesn’t automatically mean all beings get treated the same, since adult humans will have more complex interests than will animals, children, patients with severe dementia, and so on).

* Benefit 1: This explains why it’s OK for women to have slightly different rights then men as it relates to things like pregnancy.
* Benefit 2: This explains why it’s wrong to discriminate against people with development disabilities, brain damage, or severe dementia. It also expla rigins why racism and sexism would *still* be wrong, even if it turned out that there were statistically significant differences between groups of humans.
* Conclusion: Since many non-human animals have interests, it follows that we must give these interests moral consideration in the same way (and for the same reason) we give moral consideration to the interests of people of different genders or races. This doesn’t mean that non-human animals should have the “same rights” as humans—it would be silly to allow them to vote, etc.

**According to Singer, it is the ability to *suffer* that grounds moral standing**. This explains why racism and sexism are wrong, and also explains why it is wrong to treat non-human animals badly. It also explains why we *don’t* have moral duties to things like rocks, plants, or insects.

## What Does Singer’s View Entail?

Singer is a utilitarian. Because of this, he thinks that there are no hard-and-fast rules that apply to every situation in exactly the same way. With that in mind, here are the basic conclusions of Singer’s argument:

* **Some “rules of thumb.”** I**n** general, it is immoral to buy and eat commercially raised animal products (though maybe “humanely raised” would be OK?). If you live in a rich country (where vegan and vegetarian food are widely available), and you don’t have any special health conditions requiring that you eat animal products, then you ought to refrain from doing so.
* **Less suffering is better.** Since Singer is a utilitarian, he’ll endorse a “less meat is better” policy—this isn’t an all-or-nothing argument.
* **Medical experimentation.** Some experimentation on animals *might* be justified. However, Singer argues that experimentation on animals will be justified *only* if we would (in theory) be willing to using a human infant (or developmentally disabled person) in the same sort of experiment. He thinks this criterion would vastly reduce the amount of experimentation that would be done.

On Singer’s view (as on many ethical views), it ends up being somewhat easier to justify something like medical experimentation on animals than it is to justify eating them. After all, medical experimentation can, at least in certain cases, provide *huge* benefits to both humanity and other animals, and there are pretty strict controls on animal welfare in such experiments. Eating animals, by contrast, doesn’t promise any huge benefits to humanity (e.g., we don’t have any great evidence that meat-eaters enjoy their meals any more than vegans to).

## Review Question: Some Bad Arguments

Here are a number of common arguments against granting moral status to animals. What (if anything) is wrong with these arguments?

* “I enjoy eating animal products. It’s moral for me to do things I enjoy. So, eating animal products is moral.”
* “Human teeth were *designed* for eating meat, and our stomachs were *designed* for digesting it. So, eating meat is morally OK.”
* “It would be morally wrong to kill 1 human infant to save 1000 cows. So, eating cows is OK.”
* “If that pig were given the chance to, it would happily kill and eat me. So, it’s morally OK for me to kill and eat the pig.”

Can you think of any *better* argument against granting moral status to animals?

# Reading: Utilitarianism—An Introduction (by Mark Dimmock and Andrew Fisher)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Some things appear to be straightforwardly good for people. Winning the lottery, marrying your true love or securing a desired set of qualifications all seem to be examples of events that improve a person’s life. As a normative ethical theory, Utilitarianism suggests that we can decide what is morally right or morally wrong by weighing up which of our future possible actions promotes such goodness in our lives and the lives of people more generally.

## Hedonism

Hedonism is a theory of well-being — a theory of how well a life is going for the person living that life. What separates Hedonism from other theories of well-being is that the hedonist believes that what defines a successful life is directly related to the amount of pleasure in that life; no other factors are relevant at all. Therefore, the more pleasure that a person experiences in their life then the better their life goes, and vice versa. Whereas other theories might focus on fulfilling desires people have, or an objective list of things such as friendship and health.

The roots of Hedonism can be traced back at least as far as **Epicurus** (341–270 BC) and Ancient Greece. Epicurus held the hedonistic view that the primary *intrinsic* good for a person is pleasure; meaning that pleasure is always good for a person in and of itself, irrespective of the cause or context of the pleasure. According to this theory pleasure is always intrinsically good for a person and less pleasure is always intrinsically bad.

Hedonism is a relatively simple theory of what makes your life better. If you feel that your life would be better if you won the lottery, married your true love or achieved your desired qualifications, then the hedonistic explanation of these judgments is that these things are good for you only if they provide you with pleasure. Many pleasures may be physical, but **Fred Feldman** (1941–) is a defender of a theory known as Attitudinal Hedonism. According to this theory, psychological pleasures can themselves count as intrinsically good for a person. So, while reading a book would not seem to produce pleasure in a physical way, a hedonist may value the psychological pleasure associated with that act of reading and thus accept that it can improve a person’s well-being. This understanding of hedonistic pleasure may help to explain why, for example, one person can gain so much pleasure from a Lady Gaga album while another gains nothing at all; the psychological responses to the music differ.

**[Brendan: While Epicurus thought the only intrinsic good was “pleasure”, he argued that the way to achieve was to spend as much time with friends as possible, live a simple life (that doesn’t cost much money!), and leave plenty of time for contemplation. What do you think of this idea?]**

## Nozick’s Experience Machine

One important problem for Hedonism is that our well-being seems to be affected by more than just the total pleasure in our lives. It may be the case that you enjoy gaining a new qualification, but there seems to be more to the value of this event than merely the pleasure produced. Many people agree that success in gaining a meaningful qualification improves your life even if no pleasure is obtained from it. Certainly, many believe that the relationship between what improves your life and what gives pleasure is not directly proportional, as the hedonist would claim.

**Robert Nozick** (1938–2002) attacked the hedonistic idea that pleasure is the only good by testing our intuitions via a now famous thought-experiment. Nozick asks:

*Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, pre-programming your life experiences?* […] *Of course, while in the tank you won’t know that you’re there; you’ll think that it’s all actually happening* […] *would you plug in?*[**1**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-019)

Nozick’s challenge to Hedonism is based on the thought that most people who consider this possible situation would opt *not* to plug in. Indeed, if you ask yourself if you would actually choose to leave behind your real friends, family and life in favour of a pre-programmed existence you also might conclude that plugging into the experience machine would not be desirable. However, if Hedonism is correct and our well-being is determined entirely by the amount of pleasure that we experience, then Nozick wonders “what else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?”[**2**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-018) The experience machine guarantees us pleasure yet we find it unappealing compared to a real life where pleasure is far from assured. This may suggest that our well-being is determined by other factors in addition to how much pleasure we secure, perhaps knowledge or friendships.

The hedonists need not give way entirely on this point, of course, as they may feel that the experience machine is desirable just because it guarantees experiences of pleasure. Or, you might believe that our suspicions about the machine are misplaced. After all, once inside the machine we would not suspect that things were not real. You may feel that the hedonist could bite-the-bullet (accept the apparently awkward conclusion as a non-fatal implication of the theory) and say that any reticence to enter the machine is *irrational*. Perhaps the lives of those choosing to be plugged in to the machine would go extraordinary well!

**[Brendan: So…would you plug into the Experience Machine?]**

## The Foundations of Bentham’s Utilitarianism

**Jeremy Bentham** (1748–1832) was the first of the “classical utilitarians”. Driven by a genuine desire for social reform, Bentham wanted to be as much involved in law, politics and economics as abstract philosophising.

Bentham developed his moral theory of Utilitarianism on the foundation of the type of hedonistic thinking described in section two. For Bentham, the only thing that determines the value of a life, or indeed the value of an event or action, is the amount of pleasure contained in that life, or the amount of pleasure produced as a result of that event or action. Bentham is a *hedonistic utilitarian*. This belief in Hedonism, however, was not something that Bentham took to be unjustified or arbitrary; for him Hedonism could be *empirically justified* by evidence in the world in its favour. According to Bentham:

*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.*[**3**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-017)

Bentham moves from this empirical claim about the factors that guide our behaviour to a normative claim about how we *ought* to live. He creates a moral theory based on the bringing about of more pleasure and less pain.

When first understanding Utilitarianism, it is also crucial to understand what is meant by the term “utility”. Bentham defined it as “[…] that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness […] or […] to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness”.[**4**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-016) Utility is thus promoted when pleasure is promoted and when unhappiness is avoided. Bentham’s commitment to Hedonism means for him that goodness is just an increase in pleasure, and evil or unhappiness is just an increase in pain or decrease in pleasure. With this understanding of utility in mind, Bentham commits himself to the *Principle of Utility*:

*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.*[**5**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-015)

In effect, this principle simply says that promoting utility, defined in terms of pleasure, is to be approved of and reducing utility is to be disapproved of.

The Principle of Utility, backed by a commitment to Hedonism, underpins the central utilitarian claim made by Bentham. Based on a phrase that he wrongly attributed to **Joseph Priestley** (1733–1804), Bentham suggests that the measure of right and wrong is the extent to which an action produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Of course, what counts as good, for Bentham, is pleasure. We can then rephrase what Bentham himself call his fundamental axiom as a requirement to *promote the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people, in order to act morally*.

**[Brendan: Before reading further, what do you think of Bentham’s proposal?]**

## The Structure of Bentham’s Utilitarianism

In addition to being hedonistic, Bentham’s Utilitarianism is also:

1. Consequentialist/Teleological
2. Relativist
3. Maximising
4. Impartial

Bentham’s Utilitarianism is *consequentialist* because the moral value of an action or event is determined entirely by the consequences of that event. The theory is also described as *teleological* for the same reason, based on the Greek word *telos*that means “end” or “purpose”. If more pleasure follows as a consequence of “Action A” rather than “Action B”, then according to the fundamental axiom of Utilitarianism “Action A” should be undertaken and is morally right; choosing “Action B” would be morally wrong.

In addition, Bentham’s Utilitarianism is *Relativistic*rather than *Absolutist*. Absolutist moral views hold that certain actions will always be morally wrong irrespective of context or consequences. For example, many campaigning groups suggest that torture is always morally unacceptable whether it is carried out by vindictive dictators seeking to instil fear in a population or whether it is authorised by democratically elected governments seeking to obtain information in order to stop a terrorist attack. For absolutists then, the act of torture is absolutely wrong in all cases and situations.

Clearly, Bentham cannot hold this type of view because sometimes the pain involved in torture may lead to the promotion of greater pleasure (or less intense pain) overall, such as in the case where torture stops a terrorist atrocity. On this basis, the Benthamite utilitarian must believe that whether a certain action is right or wrong is always relative to the situation in which the action takes place.

Bentham’s Utilitarianism is ***maximising***because it does not merely require that pleasure is promoted, but that the *greatest* pleasure for the *greatest* number is secured. This means that some actions that lead to pleasure will still not be morally good acts if another action that could have produced even more pleasure in that setting was rejected. Thus, for example, if you gain some pleasure from spending money on a new book, but that money could have produced more pleasure had it been donated to a local charity for the homeless, then buying a new book would be morally wrong even though it led to some pleasure because it did not maximise the total amount of pleasure that was possible in that circumstance.

**[Brendan: There are also version of utilitarianism that are “satisficing” rather than maximizing. These views state that a morally right action is one that the has “good enough” consequences rather than the “best” possible consequences. What might be the attraction of this view?]**

Finally, Bentham’s Utilitarianism is also *impartial* in the sense that what matters is simply securing the maximum amount of pleasure for the maximum number of people; the theory does not give special preference regarding which people are supposed to have access to, or share in, that total pleasure. Bentham’s utilitarian theory is associated with the idea of *equal consideration of interests*; as long as total pleasure is maximised then it does not matter if that pleasure is experienced by royalty, presidents, siblings, children, friends or enemies. In the total calculation of pleasure, we are all equal regardless of our status, behaviour or any other social factor.

## Hedonic Calculus

Hopefully it is now clear that for Bentham the consequences in terms of pleasure production of any action are what determine the morality of that action, and that no other factors are relevant. However, it is not clear how exactly we should go about working out what to do in specific cases. For example:

You are a military airman flying a fighter jet that is about to intercept a passenger airliner that seems to have been hijacked by an as yet unknown figure. The plane appears to be on a path that could take it either to an airport or, potentially, directly to a major and highly populated city. You are tasked with deciding how to act and must, therefore, choose whether or not to fire a missile at the plane. Firing at the plane would kill the passengers but save all lives on the ground, yet not firing may save the passengers, or it may give the passengers only a few more minutes before the plane is flown into a city full of innocents and they are killed in any case. Suggesting that the pilot weigh up the options and choose the action that secures the greatest pleasure for the greatest number is not obviously helpful in making such a difficult decision with so many variables.

Bentham recognised that such *Problems of Calculation* relating to the pleasure associated with future actions needed addressing in order for Utilitarianism to be a workable moral theory. Bentham therefore created the **Hedonic Calculus** (sometimes known as the Felicific Calculus) in order to help an individual work out how much pleasure would be created by differing possible actions. The Hedonic Calculus, as suggested by Bentham, is based on assessing possible pleasures according to their:

1. Intensity
2. Duration
3. Certainty
4. Remoteness (i.e. how far into the future the pleasure is)
5. Fecundity (i.e. how likely it is that pleasure will generate other related pleasures)
6. Purity (i.e. if any pain will be felt alongside that pleasure)
7. Extent (i.e. how many people might be able to share in that pleasure)[**6**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-014)

The Hedonic Calculus is therefore supposed to provide a decision-procedure for a utilitarian who is confused as to how to act in a morally tricky situation. Thus, our fighter-pilot might consider the intensity of the pleasure of surviving versus the duration of the pain of death, while also needing to balance these factors against the relative certainty of the possible pains or pleasures. No doubt, the fighter pilot would still face an agonising moral choice but it seems that he would at least have some methodology for working out what Utilitarianism morally requires of him.

**[Brendan: Think of a morally tricky situation (whether from your life, a movie, video game, etc.) and try applying the “hedonic calculus.” Does it help?]**

## Problems with Bentham’s Utilitarianism

However, whether or not measuring possible actions in terms of “units of pleasure” associated with them is actually plausible is very much an open question and so the problem of calculation is not necessarily solved simply by the existence of the Hedonic Calculus. Consider the most recent highly pleasurable experience that you enjoyed and compare it to a highly pleasurable experience from earlier in your life. It may be that you cannot say confidently that one provided more pleasure than the other, especially if the experiences were extremely varied; perhaps winning a sporting trophy versus going on your first holiday. Pleasures that are so fundamentally different in nature may simply be incommensurable — they may be incapable of being measured by a common standard such as the Hedonic Calculus.

In addition, the problem of calculation can be extended beyond the issues raised above. Remember that Bentham’s Utilitarianism is impartial in the sense that all individuals who gain pleasure as a result of a certain action count towards the total amount of pleasure. However, the following case raises the ***Problem of Relevant Beings***:

You are considering whether or not to approve a new housing development on a piece of unoccupied land outside the current boundary of your town. You are clear that, if approved, the development will create a great deal of pleasure for both new residents and construction workers without any pain being experienced by others. You are aware, however, that the development will require the culling of several badgers and the removal of a habitat currently supporting many birds, stray cats and rodents of various types.

On the surface, this case should be obvious for the utilitarian without any special problem of calculation; the greatest good for the greatest number would be secured if the development were permitted to go ahead. However, this assumes that non-human animals are not relevant to the calculation of pleasures and pains. Yet, if pleasure is all that matters for how well a life goes then it is not clear why animals, that may be able to experience some form of pleasure and can almost certainly experience pain, should be excluded from the calculation process.

Indeed, Bentham, when referring to the moral value of animals, noted that: “The question (for deciding moral relevance) is not ‘Can they reason?’, nor ‘Can they talk?’, but ‘Can they suffer?’”[**7**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-013) If the suffering and pain of humans is relevant to moral calculations then surely it is at least plausible that so should the suffering and pain of non-human animals. (

Being a maximising ethical theory, Utilitarianism is also open to a ***Demandingness Objection*.** If it is not the case that pleasure needs to be merely promoted but actually *maximised at all opportunities*, then the standard for acting morally appears to be set extremely high. For example, did you buy a doughnut at some point this year or treat yourself to a magazine? Live the life of a high-roller and treat yourself to a taxi ride rather than walking to your destination? While your actions certainly brought about differing degrees of pleasure to both yourself and to those who gained economic benefit from your decision, it seems that you could have created much more pleasure by saving up your money and ensuring it reached those suffering extreme financial hardships or residing in poverty around the world. As a result of being a maximising moral theory, Utilitarianism seems to make immorality very hard to avoid as it is so utterly demanding on our behaviour.

A further problem for Utilitarianism relates to the***Tyranny of the Majority***. Remember that as a relativistic moral theory, Utilitarianism does not allow for any moral absolutes — such as the absolute right to democracy, or absolute legal or basic human rights. Indeed, Bentham himself dismissed the idea of “natural rights” as a nonsensical concept masqueraded as a meaningful one. However, if we accept that absolute rights are simply “nonsense upon stilts” as Bentham put it, then Utilitarianism seems to be open to cases where the majority are morally required to exploit the minority for the greater good of maximising total pleasure. For example, imagine that total pleasure would be maximised if the resources of a small country were forcibly taken from them to be used freely and exploited by the people of a much larger country (this is hardly unrealistic). However, such forceful theft — only justified by the fact that a greater majority of people would gain pleasure — does not seem to be morally justifiable. Yet, according to Utilitarianism’s commitment to maximising pleasure, such an action would not only be morally acceptable but it would be morally required.

As a consequentialist/teleological moral theory Utilitarianism is also open to the ***Problem of Wrong Intentions*.** This problem can be highlighted by considering the cases of Dominic and Callum.

Dominic is seating in a coffee shop when a masked intruder bursts in threatening to rob the shop. Dominic, with the intention of saving lives, attempts to stop the intruder but sadly, in the ensuing struggle, the intruder’s gun is accidentally fired and an innocent person is killed. Now, consider a second case where an intruder bursts in with a gun but Callum, rather than trying to intervene, immediately ducks for cover with the intention of saving himself and leaving the rest of the customers to fend for themselves. Luckily for Callum, when he ducks for cover he accidentally trips into the would-be thief, knocking him unconscious thus allowing his peaceful detention until police arrive.

According to the utilitarian calculation, Callum acted in a way that maximised pleasure while Dominic acted wrongly because the consequence of his act was tragic pain. However, it seems unfair and wrong to suggest that Callum acted rightly when he had just intended to save himself, although he had a lucky outcome, while Dominic acted wrongly when his intention was to save others but was unlucky in his outcome. Utilitarianism, as a consequentialist theory, ignores intentions and focuses only on consequences.

Utilitarianism also faces the ***Problem of Partiality***. This is clear if we consider the familiar moral dilemma of being stuck on a life raft with three other people but with only enough supplies for two people. On the raft with you is a doctor who is confident that he can pass on a cure for cancer if he survives, a world class violinist who brings pleasure to millions each year, and one of your parents or siblings. I am afraid to report that, for the purposes of this example, your parent or sibling is nothing special in comparison to other individuals on the raft. In this circumstance, Utilitarianism would seem to require you not only to give up your own space on the raft but ensure that your parent or sibling joins you in the freezing water with no hope of survival; this is the way of maximising total pleasure in such a scenario. Yet, even if you believe that the morality might call for your own self-sacrifice, it seems extremely unfair not to allow you to give *extra moral weight* to the life of a loved one. Unfortunately for the utilitarian, perhaps, the status as a beloved family member should make no special difference to your judgment regarding how to act. This seems to be not only over-demanding but also overly cold and calculating. Utilitarianism requires ***Agent-Neutrality*** — you must look at the situation as any neutral observer would and not give special preference to anyone irrespective of your emotional attachments, because each individual must count for one and no more than one.

Finally, Bentham’s Utilitarianism also comes under attack from the related ***Integrity Objection***, framed most prominently by **Bernard Williams** (1929–2003). As an agent-neutral theory, no person can give up impartiality when it comes to judgements about the impact of a potential action upon their family or loved ones. In addition, no person can give up impartiality when it comes to the impact of an action upon their own feelings, character and general sense of integrity. In order to make clear the potential worry associated with this, Williams describes the fictional case of **Jim and the Indians**.[**8**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-012)

Jim is an explorer who stumbles upon an Indian leader who is about to execute twenty people. Jim knows nothing of their possible crimes or any other factors involved, but he is offered a difficult choice by the Indian chief who is eager to impress his foreign traveller. Jim can either shoot one of the prisoners himself and then the rest will be set free as a mark of celebration, or he can refuse the offer in which case all twenty prisoners will be executed as was planned. It is key to note that Jim does not have control of the situation in the sense that he is powerless to bargain or negotiate with anyone, and nor can he use a weapon to successfully free any prisoners. He has only the two options laid out.

The point of this example is not to establish what the right action is. You may find yourself in agreement with utilitarians who suggest Jim must shoot one prisoner in order to save the lives of the rest. Rather, the purpose of the example is to show that Utilitarianism forces us to reach this conclusion *too quickly*. Given the commitment to Agent-Neutrality, Jim must treat himself as a neutral observer working out which action will produce the greatest good for the greatest number. Morally, he is not entitled to give more weight to his own feelings than he would give to the feelings of any other and therefore it does not matter whether Jim is a pacifist and has been a lifelong advocate for prisoner reform and rehabilitation. If the utilitarian calculation suggests that he must shoot one of the prisoners then he must shoot with no regard to any compromising of his integrity and self-identity. You may accept this as an unfortunate consequence of a terrible situation, but it may be a problem for a moral theory if it fails to recognise or respect a person’s most sincere and deepest convictions.

**[Brendan: Which of the objections laid out above do you think is the strongest? Try to explain this objection in your own words, and then consider how a utilitarian might respond to it.]**

## Mill’s Utilitarian Proof

**John Stuart Mill** (1806–1873) was concerned by many of the problems facing the utilitarian theory put forward by Bentham, but as a hedonist he did not wish to see the theory rejected. Mill sought to refine and improve the Benthamite utilitarian theory in order to create a successful version of Hedonistic Utilitarianism.

Mill was so confident about the prospects for a version of Hedonistic Utilitarianism because he believed that there was an empirically backed proof available to support the principle that the greatest happiness/pleasure should always be secured for the greatest number.[**9**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-011) Mill’s proof, much like Bentham’s empirical defence of Hedonism, relies on the evidence from observation that people desire their own happiness. This observation of fact supports Mill’s claim that since people desire their own happiness, this is evidence that such happiness is desir*able*. Mill says “…each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons”.[**10**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-010) Since our happiness is good for us, and general happiness is just the total of the happiness of all persons, then general happiness is also good. To put it another way, if individual happiness is a good worth pursuing then happiness in general must be worth pursuing.

In order to justify Hedonism, Mill sought to justify the claim that the good of happiness is the *only* thing that makes our lives go better. Mill defends this claim by suggesting that knowledge, health and freedom etc. (as other plausible goods that might make a life go better) are only valuable *in so far as* they bring about happiness. Knowledge is desired only because it provides happiness when acquired, not because it, by itself and in isolation, makes life go better.

Mill’s proof of Utilitarianism in terms of the general desirability of maximising total happiness is, however, open to criticism. For one thing, the fact that something is desired does not seem to justify the claim that it is desirable. **G. E. Moore** (1873–1958) points out that Mill moves from the factual sense that something is desirable if it is desired to the normative sense that it *should*be desired without any justification. It is possible, for example, to desire to kill another person. This is desirable in the sense people could and do desire it (it is possible to do so — it is an action that is desire-*able*), but not in the sense that we would want them to desire it.

In addition, the idea that other apparent goods, such as knowledge and health, are only valuable in so far as they promote happiness/pleasure is extremely controversial; can you imagine a situation in which you gained value from knowledge without any associated pleasure or happiness? If so, you may have a counter example to Mill’s claim.

## Mill’s Qualitative Utilitarianism

In attempting to redraw Bentham’s Utilitarianism, Mill’s most substantial thought was to move away from Bentham’s idea that all that mattered was the *quantity* of total pleasure. Instead, Mill thought that *quality* of pleasure was also crucial to deciding what is moral.

Bentham’s Utilitarianism is quantitative in the sense that all Bentham focusses on is the maximisation of hedonically calculated quantities of total pleasure. Thus, he says that “Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry”.[**11**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-009) All that matters for Bentham is producing pleasure and the way this is achieved is unimportant. If playing on a console affords you more pleasure than reading Shakespeare, then Bentham would view your life as going better if you play the console. However, Mill introduces a quality criterion for pleasure. Mill says that:

*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 only because they only know their own side of the question.*[**12**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-008)

Bentham could not admit that the unhappy Socrates would be living a life with more value than the happier fool. Mill, on the other hand, believes that *quality*, not merely quantity, of pleasure matters and can therefore defend the claim that Socrates has the better life even by hedonistic standards.

According to Mill, higher pleasures are worth more than lower pleasures. Higher pleasures are those pleasures of the intellect brought about via activities like poetry, reading or attending the theatre. Lower pleasures are animalistic and base; pleasures associated with drinking beer, having sex or lazing on a sun-lounger. What we should seek to maximise are the higher quality pleasures even if the total pleasure (hedonically calculated via Bentham’s calculus) turns out to be quantitatively lower as a result. Justifying this distinction between higher and lower quality pleasures as non-arbitrary and not just an expression of his own tastes, Mill says that *competent judges*, those people who have experienced both types of pleasure, are best placed to select which pleasures are higher and lower. Such competent judges, says Mill, would and do favour pleasures of the intellect over the base pleasures of the body. On this basis, Mill is open to the criticism that many people have both read books and drunk beer and that if given the choice would choose the latter. Whether or not Mill’s defence of his supposedly non-prejudiced distinction of higher and lower pleasures is successful is an open question for your evaluation and analysis.

**[Brendan: Do you agree with Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures? Why or why not?]**

## Mill’s Rule Utilitarianism versus Bentham’s Act Utilitarianism

In addition to a difference in views regarding the importance of the quality of a pleasure, Mill and Bentham are also separated by reference to Act and Rule Utilitarianism and although such terms emerged only after Mill’s death, Mill is typically considered a rule utilitarian and Bentham an act utilitarian.

An act utilitarian, such as Bentham, focuses only on the consequences of individual actions when making moral judgments. However, this focus on the outcome of individual acts can sometimes lead to odd and objection-raising examples. **Judith Jarvis Thomson** (1929–) raised the problem of the “transplant surgeon”.[**13**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-007)

Imagine a case where a doctor had five patients requiring new organs to stop their death and one healthy patient undergoing a routine check. In this case, it would seem that total pleasure is best promoted by killing the one healthy patient, harvesting his organs and saving the other five lives; their pleasure outweighs the cost to the formerly healthy patient.

While Bentham does suggest that we should have “rules of thumb” against such actions, for typically they will lead to unforeseen painful consequences, in the case as simply described the act utilitarian appears powerless to deny that such a killing is required in order to maximise total pleasure (just add your own details to secure this conclusion for the act utilitarian).

Rule utilitarians, in whose camp we can place Mill, adopt a different moral decision-procedure. Their view is that we should create a set of rules that, if followed, would produce the greatest amount of total happiness. In the transplant case, killing the healthy man would not seem to be part of the best set of utilitarian-justified rules since a rule allowing the killing of healthy patients would not seem to promote total happiness; one outcome, for example, would be that people would very likely stop coming to hospitals for fear for their life! Therefore, if a rule permitting killing was allowed then the maximisation of total happiness would not be promoted overall.

It is through Rule Utilitarianism that we can make sense of Mill’s “harm principle”. According to Mill, there is:

*…one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control.*[**14**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-006)

That principle is:

*The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.*[**15**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-005)

Even if a particular act of harming another person might bring about an increase in total pleasure on a single occasion, that act may not be condoned by the set of rules that best promotes total pleasure overall. As such, the action would not be morally permitted.

## Strong versus Weak Rule Utilitarianism

Rule utilitarians may seem to avoid troubling cases like the transplant surgeon and be able to support and uphold individual human and legal rights based on rules that reflect the harm principle. This fact would also help rule utilitarians overcome objections based on the treatment of minorities because exploitation of minority groups would, perhaps, fail to be supported by the best utilitarian-justified set of rules. Yet, rule utilitarians face a troubling dilemma:

1. *Strong Rule Utilitarianism*: Guidance from the set of rules that, if followed, would promote the greatest amount of total happiness must *always* be followed.
2. *Weak Rule Utilitarianism*: Guidance from the set of rules that, if followed, would promote the greatest amount of total happiness can be ignored in circumstances where more happiness would be produced by breaking the rule.

The strong rule utilitarian appears to suffer from what **J. J. C. Smart** (1920–2012) described as “Rule Worship”. No longer focussing on the consequences of the action before them, the strong rule utilitarian appears to ignore the option to maximise total happiness in favour of following a general and non-relative rule regarding how to act. The strong rule utilitarian may be able to avoid problems based on treatment of minorities or a lack of absolute legal and human rights, but it is not clear that they survive these problems holding on to a teleological, relativistic utilitarian theory. Utilitarianism seems to be saved from troubling implications only by denying core features.

On the other hand, while Weak Rule Utilitarianism retains a teleological nature it appears to collapse into Act Utilitarianism. The rules provide guidelines that can be broken, and given that the act utilitarian can also offer “rules of thumb” against actions that tend not to produce maximum goodness or utility in general, such as killing healthy patients, it is not clear where this version of Rule Utilitarianism gains a unique identity. In what cases would Act Utilitarianism and Weak Rule Utilitarianism actually provide different moral guidance? This is something you should consider in the light of your own examples or previous examples in this chapter.

## Comparing the Classical Utilitarians

**Bentham**

* Hedonist
* All pleasure equally valuable
* Act Utilitarian
* Teleological, impartial, relativistic, maximising

**Mill**

* Hedonist
* Quality of pleasure matters: intellectual versus animalistic
* Viewed as rule utilitarian
* If strong rule utilitarian, not clear if teleological or relativistic
* Impartial, maximising theory

## Non-Hedonistic Contemporary Utilitarianism: Peter Singer and Preference Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is not a dead theory and it did not end with Mill. **Henry Sidgwick** (1838–1900) is considered to have taken over the baton after Mill, and **R. M. Hare** (1919–2002) was perhaps chief advocate in the mid twentieth century. However, few contemporary philosophers can claim as much influence in public life outside philosophy as can the preference utilitarian, **Peter Singer** (1946–).

Singer advocates a non-hedonistic version of Utilitarianism. His utilitarian theory is teleological, maximising, impartial and relativistic but he does not claim that the greatest good for the greatest number can be reduced to pleasure in either raw or higher forms. Instead, Singer believes that what improves a person’s life is entirely determined by the satisfaction of their preferences. If you satisfy your preference to achieve a good qualification your life goes better *in virtue of satisfying that preference*. If someone else desires to get a job rather than continue in education, their life goes better for them if they secure their preference and gain employment. Individuals, according to Singer, must be at the core of moral thinking:

*There would be something incoherent about living a life where the conclusions you came to in ethics did not make any difference to your life. It would make it an academic exercise. The whole point about doing ethics is to think about the way to live. My life has a kind of harmony between my ideas and the way I live. It would be highly discordant if that was not the case*.[**16**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-004)

On this basis, when making moral decisions we should consider how best to ensure the maximisation of total preference satisfaction — it does not matter if our preference satisfaction fails to provide pleasure for us. Continuing to follow Bentham’s commitment to impartiality, Singer also supports equal weighing of preferences when deciding which action better promotes greater preference satisfaction; all preferences are to weigh equally. This potentially leaves Singer open to the same issues that plagued Bentham. Namely, regarding circumstances where partiality seems desirable, or when the preferences of the majority seem to threaten a minority group, or require us to sacrifice our integrity. Further, the problem of calculation also seems to be relevant, because it is not obvious how you could work out the preferences of others in at least some difficult moral cases (let alone the preferences of animals, if they are also relevant).

In response to a concern regarding the moral relevance of satisfying bloodthirsty or apparently immoral preferences, and counting such satisfaction as a moral achievement (consider the preferences of a nation of paedophiles, for example), we might look to the ideas of **Richard Brandt** (1910–1997). Brandt, writing about the rationality of certain preferences, suggested that rational preferences were those that might survive cognitive psychotherapy.[**17**](https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0125/ch1.xhtml#footnote-003) However, there is a question as to how arbitrary this requirement is and whether or not some unnerving preferences might form the core of certain individual characters therefore being sustained even after such therapy.

## Summary

Utilitarianism remains a living theory and retains hedonistic and non-hedonistic advocates, as well as supporters of both act and rule formulations. The core insight that consequences matter gives the theory some intuitive support even in the light of hypothetical cases that pose serious problems for utilitarians. The extent to which the different versions of Utilitarianism survive their objections is very much up to you as a critically-minded philosopher to decide.

**Common Student Mistakes**

* Not reflecting the attitudinal aspect of pleasure that Bentham’s theory may account for.
* Minimising the long-term impact of actions when it comes to pleasure/pain production.
* Imprecise understanding of the hedonic/non-hedonic split in Utilitarianism.
* Imprecision in use of examples to defend/challenge Utilitarianism.
* Suggesting that “Jim and the Indians” is not a counterexample to Utilitarianism simply because you judge killing the fewer number of people is ultimately the morally right thing to do.

## Issues To Consider

1. Is there anything that would improve your life that cannot be reduced to either pleasure or preference satisfaction?
2. Would you enter Nozick’s experience machine if you knew you would not come out? Would you put someone you care about into the machine while they were asleep, so that they never had to make the decision?
3. Can pleasure be measured? Does Bentham go about this task correctly?
4. Which is the most serious problem facing Bentham’s Act Utilitarianism? Can it be overcome?
5. Does Mill successfully improve Bentham’s Act Utilitarianism in any way?
6. Are you ever told to stop watching television and do something else? Is this good for you? Why?
7. Look at the quote at the start of the chapter by Dara Ó Briain — is it possible that some pleasures are inferior in value to others?
8. Do you have convictions or beliefs you would not want to sacrifice for the greater good, should you ever be forced to?
9. Why do utilitarians not give up on the idea of maximising pleasure and just talk in terms of promoting sufficient pleasure? Would this solve or raise problems?
10. Is Weak Rule Utilitarianism merely Act Utilitarianism by another name?
11. Does Strong Rule Utilitarianism deserve to be labelled as a utilitarian theory?
12. If your preferences change after psychotherapy, did the original preferences ever matter?

# What Peter Singer Has Learned in 45 Years of Advocating For Animals (by Kelsey Piper and Peter Singer)

Forty-five years ago, Australian philosopher Peter Singer published the book *Animal Liberation*. The arguments it made— that animals can suffer; that it is morally wrong to inflict extraordinary suffering upon them; and that we consequently haveto rethink our farming and food systems — are ones that many consumers today will have heard.

At the time, however,Singer’s perspective was a deeply unusual one. There were animal advocacy groups,certainly, but they tended to focus on the plight of abandoned pet animals, like cats and dogs, with no major organization working on the plight of farmed animals (more on this below).

In a 1999 **New Yorker profile**, journalist Michael Specter wrote thatSinger “gave birth to the animal-rights movement.” Singer’s book, activist Ingrid Newkirk **wrote**, “was a philosophical bombshell. It forever changed the conversation about our treatment of animals. It made people — myself included — change what we ate, what we wore, and how we perceived animals.” Simply put, the animal welfare movement would not be where it is today without Singer and his book.

Now, 45 years later, he’s revisiting the topic in a new book — a collection of his essays called ***Why Vegan?***, released for sale in the US last week. I spoke with Singer about the history of the animal welfare movement, what progress we’ve made since *Animal Liberation*came out, and what it will take to change the world he’s been criticizing for nearly half a century now.

This transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity.

**Kelsey Piper**

You first wrote about the case for caring about animals 45 years ago. What has changed?

**Peter Singer**

A lot has changed, really. There has been a huge amount of change in awareness. Quite frankly, there is an animal movement now, which is concerned about all animals, not just about dogs and cats and horses.

And there really wasn’t in 1975. It’s not that thereweren’t sort of tiny organizations. There were so many vivisection organizations [which work to combat the practice of animal vivisection for research], actually. But in terms of farm animals, there was really nothing going on. There was a small organization called Compassion in World Farming in the UK when I got into it, which is now a sort of quite large global organization. **But it was run by one guy out of his home**, I think, at the time, and there was no legislation to protect the welfare of farm animals.

Now, the **entire European Union has prohibited** some of the worst forms of confinement that I described in *Animal Liberation*. And so has **the state of California**. And I think **six or seven other states** in the US also have legislation protecting farm animals. So that’s a big change.

Then there’s a huge change in the availability of vegetarian and vegan food. Nobody would have known what vegan meant in 1975. There was this very small British organization that was founded in the late ’40s, called the **Vegan Society**. That was probably pretty much all of the vegans in the UK. And virtually none in the US either. There’s been a huge growth of awareness — organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, to courses in animal law being taught at Harvard. There was none of that happening at all [in 1975].

So that’s an immense amount of change. But there hasn’t been nearly enough change in the way we treat animals.

**Kelsey Piper**

There’s change, maybe, in people’s interest in the issue and how we think about it, but still a pretty bad situation on the ground, and in some ways getting worse, right? Because we have more automation, we have more technology. We’ve bred birds differently.

**Peter Singer**

Yeah, the breeding of chickens in particular is a really bad aspect of it. They grow faster, they put on weight faster, and they seem to be in more pain just standing up now. That’s one difference, which **you’ve written about**.

The other thing that I would say is — it isn’t bad that China and a lot of other countries are more prosperous. That’s great because there are fewer people in extreme poverty. But there are also hundreds of millions more people wanting to eat meat, [previously] unable to afford to eat meat. And China, in particular, has no national laws about animal welfare at all. The multiplying factory farms, what conditions the animals undergo — they’re pretty terrible. When you go to China, you see [animal abuses] that are pretty horrible you wouldn’t see here in the US.

**Kelsey Piper**

I’m also curious about the philosophy side of this. Are the arguments that you put forward 45 years ago still what you see as some of the strongest arguments for animals?

**Peter Singer**

I think the arguments that I put forward in 1975 are still the basic arguments, which seemed to me the most cogent. So what happened after I wrote *Animal Liberation* is that a number of different philosophers use different approaches.[American philosopher]Tom Regan’s **animal rights argument**, for example, wasn’t really in the literature beforehand, not in the form that Tom put it in, and a variety of other different views. [Regan argues that from a Kantian perspective, at least some animals have intrinsic rights as humans do, because they are what he called “subjects-of-a-life.”]

So there is more pluralism about different approaches, philosophically, that lead to somewhat similar conclusions. But I remain a consequentialist. [There are] rights-based approaches — for those who like that approach ... [they] are out there, and that’s a good thing. Martha Nussbaum’s **capabilities approach** comes to a similar conclusion as well. [Nussbaum’s approach argues that ethics should be focused on the freedom to achieve well-being, and understood in terms of how many real opportunities to do that someone has.]

**Kelsey Piper**

I have seen it said that animals mattering, and being of moral significance — and accordingly, factory farming being very bad — is something of a rare area of agreement in moral philosophy.

**Peter Singer**

Yeah, absolutely. And even people who disagree on some of the points, like Roger Scruton, who died recently, was a conservative, British philosopher. Some sort of religious bent, I think, because hetalked about [how] we should have piety towards animals. He certainly continued to eat them, and even champion eating them, but he **certainly opposed factory farming**.

**Kelsey Piper**

I’m curious what you see as the strongest, simply put argument for being vegan.

**Peter Singer**

I think that it removes you completely from complicity in practices that are not morally defensible about the raising and killing of animals for food.

There are more complicated arguments about whether you’re justified in bringing animals into existence who would not otherwise have existed and have a good life, about animals raised in suitable conditions and humanely killed. So you know, there are arguments for defending some forms of animal consumption. I don’t know what the impact of that is on attitudes to animals and whether it reinforces the idea that animals are still things for us to use.

**Kelsey Piper**

Are you personally vegan?

**Peter Singer**

Strictly speaking, no. For example, I don’t think that bivalves — mussels and clams — I don’t think they can suffer, so I eat them. I would certainly eat cellular-based meat, once it was available. And I’m not really strict about avoiding free-range eggs.

**Kelsey Piper**

That’s been one of the struggles in our family, finding eggs that we are confident come from chickens who were well-treated.

**Peter Singer**

Yes, that’s right. I think it’s somewhat easier to get genuinely free-range eggs in Australia [where Singer lives] than in big American cities anyway. It’s not always that easy to sort out which are labeled free range, but actually kept in big warehouses with small patches where they can go outside. In Australia they report the stocking density.

**Kelsey Piper**

In 2020, of course, there’s lots of old arguments about animal farming that are still relevant. But there’s also some new sorts of concerns on everybody’s horizon — like the potential for **pandemics** and the potential for **contributing to climate change**.

**Peter Singer**

The last essay in the collection is a 2020 essay about the origins of the coronavirus pandemic, flu, and whatnot. It talks about wet markets, and the combination of cruelty and health risk that involves.

When I published *Animal Liberation*, I was focused entirely on the animal aspect of it. Then, during the ’80s, I became aware of the climate change issue, and of the role of animal production in that. So there was a second major argument for avoiding animal products. When I talk to people who’ve become vegan in the last few years, I find climate has played quite a significant role.

And then in recent years, I’ve become aware of the risk of pandemics coming out of factory farming. So what I say in the book is — there’s now this third reason: animals, climate, pandemics.

## Brendan’s Questions

1. Which particular claims/ideas of Singer do you find most interesting/surprising? Why?
2. To what extent do you think that earlier utilitarians like Mill or Bentham would agree with Singer (supposing they were alive today)?
3. Besides the issues Singer mentions, what other questions/problems could utilitarian ethics be applied to?

1. Mark Dimmock and Andrew Fisher, *Ethics for A-Level* (Open Book Publishers, 2017), https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0125. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)