

# 1 The science of morality

What is the goal of a **normative theory**? Well, in one sense, the purpose of a normative theory is to describe the portion of reality corresponding to moral truths. In this sense, normative theories are a lot like theories in physics or other sciences. Take, for example, Newton's proposal for the laws of motion:

## The laws of motion

1.  $F = ma$
2. An object at rest tends to stay at rest; an object in motion tends to remain in motion.
3. For every action, there exists an equal and opposite action.

These laws can be thought of as governing all the possible instances of motion in our world. The goal for the normative theorist is to give a similar set of laws, or principles, that govern all the possible instances of moral evaluation in our world.

# 2 The principle of utility

John Stuart Mill argues that the moral facts are governed by a single principle, which he calls, alternatively, the *principle of utility* or the *greatest happiness principle* (GHP):

**GHP** In any circumstance, the right action is the one that produces the greatest overall happiness

For Mill, **happiness** is to be understood purely in terms of two qualities:

- the presence of pleasure
- the absence of pain

Thus, a consequence of Mill's theory is that anything that is *valuable* is so insofar as it is:

1. inherently pleasurable, or
2. a means to promoting pleasure

An initial motivation for this theory is that happiness is often an *explanatory stopping point* in justifying claims about what we ought to do. For instance, imagine the following exchange:

**Bob:** You ought to go to class.

**Sally:** Why is that?

**Bob:** Because it will help you get a good grade.

**Sally:** Ok, but why is that important?

**Bob:** Because then you can graduate with honors.

**Sally:** Ok, but why is that important?

**Bob:** Because then you'll get a good job.

**Sally:** Ok, but why is that important?

**Bob:** Because you'll be able to afford doing things you like.

**Sally:** Ok, but why is that important?

**Bob:** Because that will make you happy.

**Sally:** Ok, but why is that important?

While most of Sally's questions are reasonable (if rather tedious) the last one doesn't make as much sense. What else could Bob say in response?

### 3 Problems for utilitarianism

While utilitarianism's focus on happiness is well motivated, many people think that it can't possibly be the whole story about morality. In this section, we'll look at potential problems for utilitarianism and see if the utilitarian can give adequate responses to them.

#### 3.1 Pleasure is too limited to cover all value

Imagine the following two lives:

**Sad Socrates** Socrates was thought by many to be the wisest man in the world at his time. He spent his life examining abstract concepts and challenging common opinion. But this practice could be very emotionally trying because he realized that there was much he didn't understand, and he was ultimately sentenced to death for his teachings.

**Happy pig** This particular pig is regularly fed tasty slop, and his sty is constantly supplied with warm mud to wallow in. He has no need ever to consider the worries of the world.

Most people think that Socrates' life is the better one. But on its face, the pig's life seems to have the greater balance of pleasure to pain. So how does the utilitarian explain this discrepancy?

**Kinds of pleasure** It is available to the utilitarian to recognize that there may be different kinds of pleasure, and that certain kinds might be more valuable than others. Thus, the utilitarian has the resources to measure happiness in two ways:

- Quantity: the intensity and duration of a pleasurable or painful event.
- Quality: the kind of pleasure or pain involved in the event.
  - *Experiential pleasure*: like that associated with feeling warm sunshine or eating yummy food.
  - *Cognitive pleasure*: like that associated with discovering the answer to an exam question or appreciating the prose in a story one is reading.

Thus, the utilitarian can explain our intuition by saying that Socrates' life, while it contains more experiential displeasure than the pig's, also involves a lot of cognitive pleasure. And cognitive pleasure is worth more overall happiness.

### 3.2 Pleasure is variable from one person to the next

We're all familiar with the concept of *masochism*. The masochist is a person who seems to take great pleasure in painful experiences. While we might think masochism is weird, we don't think that they are immoral. But if absence of pain is valuable, doesn't the utilitarian have to say that masochism is immoral?

**Action types vs. experiences** The problem here can be resolved by thinking about what things moral value attaches to. If we think that value attaches to *action types*, then utilitarianism runs into problems with masochism. If we say the action of *hurting oneself* is wrong because it brings about pain, then we can't explain why masochism is morally ok.

But the utilitarian would rather say that value attaches to *experiences*, and one action type might produce different experiences for different people. Hurting oneself can be morally ok because, *for the masochist*, it brings about pleasurable experiences. And if it doesn't bring about pleasurable experiences for you, then you shouldn't hurt yourself.

**Whose happiness matters?** One consequence of viewing value in this way is that we can't really distinguish between pleasure and pain based on who experiences it. For the utilitarian, if an action will impact pleasure, then we have to consider it, no matter who experiences the pleasure. Thus, the utilitarian will often expand moral consideration to include not just existing humans, but also **animals** and **future humans**.

### 3.3 Utilitarianism is too strict of a standard to follow

The GHP requires us to consider all of the pleasure and pain our actions might bring about before we act. But this just seems like an overly onerous task.

**Ought implies can** There is definitely a worry here. It seems to be a principle of morality that we can only require something of a person if they are capable of doing it. So, if utilitarianism makes requirements that no one can follow, then it can't be an acceptable theory of morality.

But we should be clear about what utilitarianism requires before condemning it. This general worry can be broken into two sub-problems for utilitarianism:

1. Our actions have wide influence in the world, but I can't possibly know for far the consequences of my action will reach. This is even more evident when I think about *future people*. How can I be sure that what seems like a good action here and now won't go drastically awry later on?
  - As one response, the utilitarian can point out that, while our actions can have far reaching consequences, they don't extend forever. So, we can often focus on a central area of impact without worrying about the distant future or far corners of the Earth.
  - Second, the utilitarian can emphasize that what is important is the **expected utility** of an action. They maintain that happiness is what is important, but we can only require of people that they do what they reasonably expect to bring about the most happiness. We can't fault them if they did their best to promote happiness but the world conspired against them.
  - The idea is that one's *responsibility* for an action is limited by what one can reasonably expect to follow from that action. Since reason only extends so far into the future and distant corners of the world, responsibility, too, is limited.
2. There are so many factors in play for any action that it's ludicrous to think that I could calculate all of them on the spot. Utilitarianism seems to entail *paralysis* because we'll always be calculating overall happiness and never acting.
  - This worry misrepresents the situation we find ourselves in. The utilitarian says that we should promote happiness, but they don't say what tools we are allowed to use to determine what will promote happiness the best. We can draw on all our past experience as well as the knowledge we have required from others when we decide what to do. For instance, I know that

stabbing people in the eye with sharp sticks brings about pain, so I don't have to calculate the particular values every time I have a stick in my hand. I can safely eliminate the action of stabbing someone in the eye as a viable possibility.

### 3.4 Utilitarianism ignores other important principles and duties

Utilitarianism says that the only moral principle is to increase happiness. But on the face of things, we recognize a number of other principles, and these sometimes conflict with promoting happiness. Here are two examples:

1. The principle of preserving life: We can imagine a situation in which the way to promote happiness is to end a person's life. But that violates the principle that life is sacred.
2. Following societal duty (justice): Imagine a police officer who witnesses a crime, and the only way for him to apprehend the criminal is to shoot him. The police officer has a duty to uphold the law, but shooting the criminal will (we can imagine) bring about a lot of displeasure.

One move available to the utilitarian is to try to spell out the cases in more detail. Perhaps if we explain all of the various consequences of the proposed action, we will see that the action that increases overall happiness is actually in line with the purported principle.

But, we can imagine some cases where the greatest happiness doesn't track what the principle tells us to do. In these cases, the utilitarian must grant that the GHP is at odds with the other principle (such as the principle that life is sacred).

At this point the utilitarian will ask us whether we genuinely think that the other principle should be maintained. In essence, the utilitarian claims that the only fundamental moral principle is the GHP. Other principles are merely **guides** to moral action that sometimes lead us astray.

Take the police officer case, for instance. Let's imagine that the criminal is not likely to commit another crime and that he has strong family ties, so that many people would be negatively affected if he was shot. Then it seems that the police officer really should let the criminal go; he would do more harm than good in shooting the criminal. The utilitarian maintains that doing what one can to apprehend criminals is generally good, but in this case it is not the right action.

Another way to put the response is that the reason we establish such duties is that following them generally brings about greater happiness, but when this doesn't happen, the duty isn't actually in effect.