



Republic of the Philippines  
**Polytechnic University of the Philippines**  
Quezon City Branch

# INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL

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on

## **GEED 10093**

# **ETHICS**

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**GEED 10093 – ETHICS**  
**Module 9**

**Week 12: Utilitarian Ethics: John Stuart Mill's The Maximization of Happiness**

**Topics**

1. The Classical Version of the Utilitarian Ethics: Mill's Utilitarianism
2. A Contemporary Version of the Utilitarian Ethics: Richard Brandt's "Toward a Credible Form of Utilitarianism"

**Learning Outcomes**

1. Apply and factor in human values (intellectual, moral sentiment, aesthetic, and the like) into the standard of "happiness"
2. Draw the line and appreciate: values fit for human subject and values fit for swines
3. Explain why some choose lesser values while maintaining preference to higher human values in the light of Mill
1. Understand this utilitarian ethics as interpreted in contemporary view.

**Teaching Learning Activities**

1. 9th 3-hour video conferencing lecture session;
2. Read the following Readings in Ethics:
  - a. Velasquez, Manuel and Rostankowski, Cynthia, eds. Ethics: Theory and Practice, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1985), pp.102 - 121.
  - b. John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, in Dissertitions and Discussions: Political, Philosophical and Historical, vol. III (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1874) pp. 300-91. Selections are from pp. 305-6, 308-13, 314-15, 323-24, 348-54.
  - c. Richard B. Brandt, "Toward a Credible Form of Utilitarianism," in Morality and the Language of Conduct, Hector-Neri Castaneda and George Nakhnikian, eds. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963) pp. 109-10, 115, 118, 123-25.
3. Watch the following YouTube links:
  - a. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-a739VjqdSI>
  - b. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfiEa6MfoTw>
  - c. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dr9954kaFBs>
  - d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01Y1zVGv9h>

## Assessment/Activities

1. Submit Reflection Paper # 9 based on the readings and discussions.
2. Do and submit Exercise # 9.

## Course Materials

### Classical Version of the Utilitarian Ethics: John Stuart Mill's Greatest Happiness Principle

Utilitarianism is based upon the principle that an action is morally right if it produces a greater quantity of good or happiness than any other possible action. Utilitarianism is thus a moral theory that requires one to look at the end results or consequences of one's actions to determine their morality. It is therefore sometimes called a "teleological" theory (from the Greek word *telos*, which means "end" or "result") or a "consequentialist" ethical theory of morality.

All utilitarian theories claim that the morality of an action depends on the amount of goodness the action produces, although utilitarians hold considerably different views concerning what consists of. Some, like John Stuart Mill, hold that pleasure or happiness (or satisfaction or some other pleasant state of consciousness) is the only basic good; others hold that there are many things besides pleasant states of mind that are intrinsically good, such as friendship, knowledge, love, courage, health, beauty, and so on. Regardless of their views on what constitutes goodness, utilitarians all agree that only intrinsic or ultimate goods should be taken into account when evaluating the morality of our actions. Intrinsic goods are things we value for themselves, and not merely because of what they will get us.

Utilitarians also agree that in order to determine the morality of an act, one must measure the amount of good the act will produce, and subtract from this the amount of evil it will also produce. The net result is the "utility" of the act. The morally correct act is the one that is likely to produce the greatest amount of utility.

### Mill's Own Definition of Utilitarianism: the Greatest Happiness Principle – Two Alternatives

#### 1. First Alternative

Utilitarianism holds that everyone should seek happiness. Now ordinarily one proves that one should seek a certain object by showing that that object will get one something else that one desires. But happiness is an ultimate end, that is, it is desired for its own sake and not because it will get us something else that we want. Mill summed up what he calls the greatest happiness principle: ***"The creed which accepts***

***the greatest happiness principle as the foundation of morals 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."***

***"The standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator."***

***"The test of morality is not the greatest happiness of the agent himself. Utilitarianism does not dream of defining morality to be the self-interest of the agent. The greatest happiness principle is the greatest happiness of mankind and of all the sentient creatures."***

Mill claims that this utilitarian principle is based on a certain theory of life (that is, a certain view of human nature), namely that in all their actions people are only seeking pleasure (or happiness) or fleeing pain.

## 2. Second Alternative

Mill has stated that morality is a matter of consequences. An act is right or wrong, according to its consequences, not because it agrees with someone's opinion, or with universal opinion, or with nature, or (by implication) with God's will. He pauses a moment to elaborate this point: ***"By calculating the consequences is meant, generally, calculating the consequences of classes of actions. There are, as we shall note, exceptions to this, but over all we must look at actions as though multiplied, and in large masses. Take murder for example. There are many persons, to kill whom would be to remove men who are a cause of no good to any human being, who are a cause of cruel physical and moral suffering to several, and whose whole influence tends to increase the mass of unhappiness and vice. Were such a man to be murdered, the balance of traceable consequences would be greatly in favour of the act. But the counter consideration, still on the principle of utility, is that unless persons were punished for killing, and taught not to kill, nobody's life would be safe."***

After this, Mill has turned to objections that may be raised from the discussions. A study of these objections and replies will clarify and fix the doctrine in one's mind.

1. The first objection is that such a moral philosophy is a godless doctrine: ***"Utilitarianism is a godless doctrine: the appeal to happiness, instead of the appeal to the will of God, is a godless, i.e. irreligious, principle of morality."***

Mill's answer is to carry the war into the enemy's camp: *"the question (whether the appeal to happiness is a godless doctrine) depends upon what idea we have formed of the moral character of the Deity. If it be a true belief that god desires above all things the happiness of His creatures, and that this was His purpose in their creation, then utilitarianism is not only not a godless doctrine, but more profoundly religious than any other. If the objection (that utilitarianism is a godless doctrine) means the utilitarianism does not recognize the revealed will of God as the supreme law of morals, I answer: an utilitarian who believes in the perfect goodness and wisdom of God, necessarily believes that whatever God has thought fit to reveal on the subject of morals must fulfill the requirements of utilitarianism in a supreme degree."*

2. The second objection is that there will be no higher end than pleasure: *"To suppose that life has no higher end than pleasure, no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit, is utterly mean and grovelling: a doctrine worthy only of swine."*

Mill's answer: *"this supposes that human beings are capable of no pleasure except those of which swine are capable. If this supposition were true, the charge could not be denied; but it would then be no charge, for if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same for human beings and for swine, then the rule of life which is good enough for the one would be good enough for the other. The comparison is felt to be degrading precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conception of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification."*

3. The third objection is the dichotomy between the act and person: *"That utilitarianism (the appeal to pleasure-pain consequences of action) renders men cold and unsympathising; that it chills their moral feelings toward individuals; that it makes them regard only the consequences of actions, not taking into account the personal qualities from which those actions emanate."*

Mill's answer: *"If this means that utilitarians do not allow their judgement concerning the rightness and wrongness of an act to be influenced by their opinion of the quality of the person who does it, then it is a complaint not against utilitarianism but against having any standard of morality at all. For certainly no known ethical standard decides an action to be good or bad because it is done by a good or bad man; still less because it is done by an amiable, brave, or benevolent man, or on the contrary, these considerations are relevant, not to the*

*estimation of actions, but of persons; and there is nothing in utilitarianism inconsistent with the fact that there are other things which interest us in persons besides the rightness or wrongness of their actions.*

*The stoic moralists, indeed were fond of saying that he who has virtue has everything. But no claim of this description is made for the virtuous man by the utilitarian moralist. There are other desirable possessions and qualities besides virtue. A right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character. Actions that are blamable often proceed from the qualities entitled to praise. When this is so in any particular case, it modifies one's moral estimation of the agent, but not of the act."*

4. A fourth objection is that the morality of an action depends upon the motive, not upon the consequences.

*Mill's answer: "As to motive, the utilitarian position is this: motive has nothing to do with the morality of an action, though much with the worth of the agent. He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty or the hope of being paid for his trouble."*

5. The fifth objection: "A stock argument against utilitarianism consists in saying that an utilitarian will be apt to make his own particular case an exception to moral rules, and when under temptation, will see an utility in the breach of a rule, greater than he will see in its observance."

*Mill's answer: "But is utilitarianism the only creed which is able to furnish us with excuses for evil doing and means of cheating our own conscience? They are afforded in abundance by all doctrines which recognize as a fact in morals the existence of conflicting considerations which all doctrines do that have been believed by sane persons.*

*It is not the fault of any creed, but of the complicated nature of human affairs, that rules of conduct cannot be so framed as to require no exceptions and that hardly any kind of action can safely be laid down as either always obligatory or always condemnable.*

*There exists no moral system under which cases of conflicting obligation do not arise. These are the real difficulties, the knotty points, both in a theory of ethics and in the conscientious guidance of personal conduct. But is any one less qualified to deal with cases of conflicting obligations by reason of the fact that he possesses an ultimate standard to which such cases can be referred?"*

6. A sixth objection: *“Utilitarianism is only an appeal to expedience; and an appeal is not as high morally as an appeal to principle.”*

Mill's answer: *“The objection rests on a loose use of the term expedience. Generally, the expedient means that which is expedient for the particular interest of the agent himself; as when a minister of state sacrifices the interests of his country to keep himself in place. The expedient in this sense is a branch of the hurtful; and to claim that utilitarianism is an appeal to the expedient, in this sense, is simply to misunderstand or misrepresent its meaning.*

*Utilitarianism does recognize in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. I must repeat again, what critics have seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness but the happiness of all concerned.”*

7. A seventh objection: *“Happiness cannot be the rational purpose of life, because it is unattainable.”*

Mill's answer: *“This objection, were it well founded, would go to the root of the matter; for if no happiness is to be had at all by human beings, the attainment of it cannot be the end of morality. However, the assertion that it is impossible that human life be happy is an exaggeration.*

*If by happiness be meant by a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement, it is evident that this is impossible. A state of exalted pleasure lasts only for a few moments, or in some cases for somewhat longer periods. If this kind of intense rapture be meant by happiness, then happiness is unattainable.*

*But this is not what philosophers have meant by happiness when they taught that happiness was the end of life. The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture, but moments of such in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing. A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name happiness. And such an existence is even now the lot of many.”*

8. An eighth objection: *“We cannot calculate all the consequences of any action and thus cannot estimate the degree in which it promotes human happiness.”*

Mill's answer: *“Is there any department of human affairs in which we can do all that is desirable? Because we cannot foresee anything, is there no such thing as*

*foresight? Can no estimate be formed of consequences, which would be any guide for our conduct, unless we can calculate all consequences? Because we cannot predict every effect which may follow from a person's death, are we to say that we cannot know that murder would be destructive to human happiness? Whether morality is or is not a question of consequences, it cannot be denied that prudence is a question of consequences, and if there is such a thing as prudence, it is because the consequences of actions can be calculated."*

9. A ninth objection: *"There is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness."*

Mill's answer: *"This is exactly as if any one were to say that it is impossible to guide our conduct by Christianity, because there is not time, on every occasion on which everything has to be done, to read through the Old and New Testaments."*

*The answer to the objection is that there has been ample time, namely, the whole past duration of the human species. During all that time mankind have been learning by experience the tendencies of action; on which experience all the prudence, as well as all the morality, of life is dependent."*

10. A tenth objection: *"If happiness is made the ultimate standard by which other things are judged to be good or bad, then we are not in a position to distinguish among kinds of happiness with respect to their goodness or badness."*

Mill's answer: *"It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as the quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone."*

*Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure."*

*Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating the enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties. 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 because they know only their side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides."*



*From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On the question which of the two pleasures is the best worth having, which two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, the judgement of those who are qualified by knowledge of both must be admitted as final.... There is no other tribunal to be referred to."*

## **EXERCISE # 9**

Cite one current and relevant ethical issue and discuss its morality using Mill's Utilitarian Ethics.