the interests of all involved. Such is the emphasis of the normative theory termed *utilitarianism.*

Utilitarianism

In contrast to egoism, utilitarianism asserts that the standard of morality is the promotion of everyone's best interest. In brief, utilitarianism claims that we act morally when our actions produce the greatest possible ratio of *good* to *evil* for the greatest number of individuals. Again, as with all consequentialist positions, good and evil mean nonmoral good and evil.

QUICK REVIEW
Utilitarianism claims that a morally right action is one that produces more good and fewer bad consequences for everyone than any other action.

As formulated and developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), utilitarianism maintains that only pleasure or happiness has intrinsic value. The opening chapter of Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* unequivocally states as much. Notice in the following excerpt how Bentham moves from the pleasure and pain experienced by an individual to that experienced by the group. In so doing, he lays the basis for the utilitarian moral principle that actions are right to the extent that they promote pleasure, wrong to the extent that they produce pain:

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Jeremy Bentham: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think. The principle of utility recognizes this subjection."

> I. 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. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The *principle of utility* recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.
>
> But enough of metaphor and declamation: it is not by such means that moral science is to be improved.
>
> II. The principle of utility is the foundation of the present work: it will be proper therefore at the onset to give an explicit and determinate account of what is meant by it. 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; I say of every action whatsoever; and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.

To read more from Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, go to the Introduction to Philosophy Resource Center and browse by chapter or philosopher.

CRITICAL THINKING
Bentham assumes that pleasure and happiness have a size and so can be measured and compared. Is this assumption plausible?

III. By utility is meant the property in any object, whereby it tends to produce the benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness (all this in the present comes to the same thing), to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered; if that party be the community in general, then the happiness of the community: if a particular individual, then the happiness of that individual.

IV. The interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals: no wonder that the meaning of it is often lost.

When it has a meaning, it is this. The community is a fictitious *body*, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its *members*. The interest of the community then is, what?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it.

V. It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be *for* the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or, what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains.

It is no easy task to be good.
ARISTOTLE

VI. An action then may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility or, for shortness sake, to utility (meaning with respect to the community at large), when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it.

VII. A measure of government (which is but a particular kind of action, performed by a particular person or persons), may be said to be conformable to or dictated by the principle of utility, when in like manner the tendency which it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any which it has to diminish it.[10]

QUICK REVIEW
In Bentham's utilitarianism, good consequences consist of happiness or pleasure, and bad consequences consist of unhappiness or pain; the quantity of pleasure produced by an action is measured by its intensity, length, certainty, likelihood to produce more pleasure, and so on.

In contrast to Bentham's original formulation, many modern utilitarians say that other things besides happiness or pleasure have intrinsic worth. Such things include power, knowledge, beauty, and moral qualities. Philosophers often term these views *ideal utilitarianism*. These views have attracted philosophers such as G. E. Moore[11] and Hastings Rashdall.[12] Because we consider primarily traditional utilitarianism—the utilitarianism of Mill and Bentham—we use *good* to mean pleasure as Mill and Bentham did. However, what we say about traditional utilitarianism applies equally to pluralistic versions of utilitarianism that hold that there are other goods besides pleasure.

CRITICAL THINKING
Bentham and Mill assume that pleasure and happiness are necessarily good. Is this assumption correct? Is pleasure or happiness good for a person when acquired through evil means?

At the outset, one may wonder whether pleasure can be calculated, as utilitarianism seems to require. Bentham thought it could. In attempting to determine how much pleasure and pain would result from a person's action, he formulated a hedonistic calculus. Bentham's hedonistic calculus determines how much pleasure an action produces based on many criteria, such as the intensity of the pleasure, how long it lasts, how certain it is to occur, and how likely it is to produce additional pleasure. Later, Mill added *quality* to Bentham's calculus, by which he meant the moral superiority that one pleasure holds over another. Although Bentham's calculus doesn't allow an exact calculation of pleasure and pain, it presents valuable criteria for evaluating actions other than immediate gratification.

In developing his calculus, Bentham seems to have had in mind a particular utilitarian theory of obligation, termed **act utilitarianism**, as distinguished from **rule utilitarianism**.

10 Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1823), 1–5.
11 G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).
12 Hastings Rashdall, *A Theory of Good and Evil: A Treatise on Moral Philosophy*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924).

Act Utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism contends that we should act so as to produce the greatest happiness for the most people. In other words, before acting, ask yourself this: What will be the consequences of my action not only for myself but also for everyone else affected by my action? If the consequences are good (that is, if they will produce more happiness or pleasure than any other action I could perform in its place), then the action is right; if they are bad (that is, if they will produce more unhappiness or pain than the alternatives), then the action is wrong. In effect, for act utilitarians, the end justifies the means. This can raise problems.

QUICK REVIEW
Act utilitarianism claims that the right action is the one that itself produces more pleasure and less pain for everyone than any other action.

Suppose, for example, that you are a judge living in a small town in South Africa many years ago. The police bring a black man before you and charge him with raping a white woman the night before. The woman, who is the only witness, has positively identified him although the rape took place in the dark of night. The rape has incensed the townspeople, and a mob of vigilantes has formed. The mob declares that if you do not agree to sentence the black man to death, they will raid the small black settlement outside the town and kill several dozen black women in revenge. You know that they will carry out this threat and that you have no way of stopping them. A few hours ago, though, by sheer improbable coincidence you happened to be alone at the bedside of a dying friend who—just before dying—confessed that he had committed the rape. It would be useless to bring this utterly improbable story to the mob; they would simply accuse you of trying to get the black man off the hook by making up an unlikely story. What should you do?

The implications of act utilitarianism are clear: You should sentence the black man to death although you know that he is innocent. By sentencing him to death, you would be sacrificing one innocent life to save several other innocent people; if you declare him innocent, you would be saving one life but condemning several others to death. Utilitarianism here seems to require us to condemn an innocent man to death, which seems terribly wrong.

Rule Utilitarianism. Many ethicists point out that we get into such dilemmas when we apply the "greatest happiness" principle to a *particular act* rather than to the *general rule* that the act is following. What we should be concerned with is following the *rules* that have the best consequences, not with carrying out the *act* that has the best consequences. This stance, called rule utilitarianism, means that we should act so that the rules governing our actions are those that will produce the greatest happiness for the most people.

QUICK REVIEW
Rule utilitarianism is supposed to not have the wrong implications that act utilitarianism does. Rule utilitarianism claims that the right action is the one that follows those moral rules that will produce more pleasure and less pain if followed by everyone.

For example, courts and judges should operate with the rule "We should never punish people for something they didn't do." Clearly, if everyone followed this rule, it would have good consequences for society: People would know that the legal system would never arbitrarily punish them, and they would not suffer the fear and anxiety of never knowing how the courts would deal with them. And clearly, the opposite alternative—the rule that we can sometimes punish people for things they didn't do—would produce much worse consequences if we all started to follow it because it would create fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Consequently, say the rule utilitarians, the South African judge should stick to the rule that would have the best consequences for everyone over the long term if everyone followed it. He should not condemn the innocent man although condemning this particular man in this particular instance might produce more collective happiness. In short, we should try to find and follow those rules that will have the best consequences for everyone over the long term, instead of trying to do what will have the best consequences at one particular time. We should always follow those rules no matter what might happen in a particular case.

But is it that simple? Consider, first, the problem of trying to figure out the consequences of promoting one rule over another. What research can establish with certainty that one rule will have better social consequences than another? Given our general ignorance of how societies function, it seems impossible to give definitive answers to this question.

QUICK REVIEW
Critics claim that moral rules will produce more pleasure and less pain if they allow for exceptions, but once moral rules allow exceptions, they have the same wrong implications that act utilitarianism has.

Second, rules that allow for exceptions seem to promise more utility than rules that don't, but such rules are problematic. We have suggested, for example, that we should follow the rule "We should never punish people for something they didn't do." But wouldn't society be much better off in the long run if we promoted instead the rule "We should never punish people for something they didn't do, *except in those instances where punishing them will leave everyone else better off*"? This rule will ensure that we do not *usually* punish innocent people, but it will allow for those exceptions that increase utility, so this rule should produce more utility than the first rule. Nevertheless, notice that following this second rule will again cause the judge to execute the innocent black man. Thus, rules that allow for exceptions have the most utility, but such rules allow the same injustices that act utilitarianism does. It is not clear, then, that rule utilitarianism is really an improvement over act utilitarianism.

Some Implications of Utilitarianism

Despite these difficulties, many people believe that utilitarianism provides a very powerful analysis of ethics. To get a better understanding of utilitarianism and its strengths and weaknesses, let us consider what it implies for a moral issue raised at the beginning of this chapter: our sexual behavior.

Sex is central to human life and raises a bewildering variety of moral questions. Are some forms of sexual activity—for example, incest, homosexuality, and adultery—morally deficient, or are there no limits on what is morally permissible in sex? For act utilitarianism, the answer to these questions is straightforward: Any action is morally permissible—in fact, morally obligatory—if it produces a greater balance of pleasure over pain than any other available action. This seems to imply that virtually any sexual activity can be morally permissible—including incest, adultery, and homosexuality. All sexual activities would be permissible because normally they are all intensely pleasurable and (sometimes, at least) their pleasures outweigh their harms. Many act utilitarians have reached exactly that conclusion. For example, in *Having Love Affairs*, philosopher Richard Taylor offers an act utilitarian justification of adultery. He argues that because extramarital affairs based on love can often produce more good than harm for a married person, they are morally justified. Adultery based on love, Taylor argues, can provide a married person with another enriched human relationship, and these benefits justify the adultery:

QUICK REVIEW
Taylor and other act utilitarians argue that because all sexual activity—including incest, adultery, and homosexuality—usually produces more pleasure and less pain than any other action, all sexual activity can be morally right. To many, this view seems overly permissive.

> The joys of illicit and passionate love, which include but go far beyond the mere joys of sex, are incomparably good. And it is undeniable that those who never experience love affairs, and who perhaps even boast of their faultless monogamy year in and year out, have really missed something.[13]

Taylor goes on to argue that if revealing the affair to one's spouse will injure the spouse and the marriage relationship, then one should conceal the affair. Lying is justified, on act utilitarian grounds, if the net benefits of lying to one's spouse about an affair are greater than those of telling the truth. Other philosophers have used similar arguments to justify gay and lesbian sexual acts. Some have even argued that

13 Richard Taylor, *Having Love Affairs* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1982), 12.

if the partners are consenting adults who take suitable contraceptive precautions, incest is morally permissible. This approach to sex would seem to rule out only those sexual acts that clearly involve harmful violence or great risks of harm. For example, this approach rules out violent rape or casual sex that risks contracting AIDS or some other venereal disease.

But is this approach to sex too permissive? Aren't some sexual acts, such as incest, intrinsically wrong? Isn't it immoral for the adulterer to break his marriage promises and then lie about it to his spouse? Perhaps even utilitarians would find Taylor's analysis too facile. Utilitarianism urges us to look beyond the immediate pleasure an action produces for oneself. It says we should also consider the beneficial and harmful consequences that our actions will produce for others now and in the future. When seen in this light, act utilitarianism might condemn many sexual activities—such as incest and adultery—because of their harmful effects both on the individual involved and, more generally, on society.

In fact, a rule utilitarian approach to the ethics of sexuality focuses on these broader social effects explicitly. It asks whether the long-term social consequences of moral rules that permit a certain type of sexual activity will benefit or harm society. The Ramsey Colloquium developed such an argument against various forms of sex. The Ramsey Colloquium is a group of Christian and Jewish scholars who have argued that moral doctrines that permit adultery, divorce, and homosexuality will prove harmful to society:

> It is important to recognize the linkages among the component parts of the sexual revolution. [W]idespread adultery, easy divorce, . . . and the gay and lesbian movement have not by accident appeared at the same historical moment. They have in common a declared desire for liberation from constraint—especially constraint associated with an allegedly oppressive culture and religious tradition. They also have in common the presupposition that the body is little more than an instrument for the fulfillment of desire, and that the fulfillment of desire is the essence of the self. Finally, they all rest on a doctrine of the autonomous self. We believe it is a false doctrine that leads neither to individual flourishing nor to social well-being.
>
> Marriage and the family—husband, wife and children, joined by public recognition and legal bond—are the most effective institutions for the rearing of children, for the directing of sexual passion and for human flourishing in community. . . . Gay and lesbian "domestic partnerships" should not be socially recognized as the moral equivalent of marriage. Marriage and the family are institutions necessary for our continued social well-being. In an individualistic society that tends to liberation from all constraint, they are fragile institutions in need of careful and continuous support.[14]

The members of the Ramsey Colloquium argue that moral rules tolerant of homosexuality, adultery, and divorce are having harmful effects on family structures. These effects in turn harm society. They imply that it is wrong to accept and follow such permissive moral rules. But is this rule utilitarian argument about the morality of sexual activities correct? Is it clear to you that the acceptance of the moral permissibility of adultery, divorce, and homosexuality will have the harmful effects that critics allege? Some have argued that the reasons for the decline of the family are many and complex, and that it is simplistic to blame this decline on permissive sexual attitudes. The problem with these rule utilitarian

QUICK REVIEW

Rule utilitarians such as the Ramsey Colloquium argue that moral rules that prohibit adultery, divorce, and homosexuality will produce more pleasure and less pain than other rules, so it is wrong to engage in adultery, divorce, and homosexuality. Critics argue that it is not clear that such rules will have the consequences the Ramsey Colloquium claims they will.

14 The Ramsey Colloquium, "Morality and Homosexuality," in *Today's Moral Issues*, ed. Daniel Bonevac (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1996), 272–274.

arguments, as with almost any utilitarian approach to ethics, is that they place such heavy burdens of information gathering on us. How are we to know exactly what the significant future consequences of our moral rules or our individual actions will be?

Despite the questions it raises, utilitarianism identifies an important aspect of morality. It is true that future consequences are difficult to predict. Yet no one can deny that morally upright behavior, including sexual behavior, should attend to the consequences of what we do. We cannot deny that we should try to minimize the future harms that our sexual behaviors might inflict on ourselves and others. Also, we should try to do what we can to increase the well-being of our society. The problem, as we have seen, is that consequences are not all that matter in ethics. Therefore, we must turn to different approaches to ethics that can help us discern the other important elements of the moral life.

QUESTIONS

1. Some people argue that everyone is ultimately an ethical egoist. What do they mean by this? Do you agree? Would this prove that egoism is the basis for all ethics?
2. What are the connotations of the word *egoism*? Are these connotations compatible with what you know about ethical egoism?
3. With which concepts of knowledge and reality do you think ethical egoism is compatible?
4. Following are four ethical problems. How, if at all, would an act utilitarian solution differ from a rule utilitarian solution in each case?
   a. An aide is conferring with the president of the United States: "Mr. President, it's imperative that you win the upcoming election. If you don't, subversives will take over the government. This could spell the end of our government as we know it. We could present the public with all the facts and let them decide, but that would only alarm and panic them. There's another way, and that is to use the enormous financial connections of this administration to manipulate and mold public opinion. This, it's true, will necessitate illegal election contributions, misrepresentation of facts, and considerable fancy footwork in the campaign. But it's an immediate, practical, and judicious solution in the best interests of the nation."
   b. The daughter of a very rich and important public figure has been kidnapped. The kidnappers threaten to murder the young woman unless her father delivers $250,000 in ransom money. Authorities have told him that if he does so, he'll only be encouraging future terrorist activities that will invariably involve more people, more suffering, and more deaths.
   c. Taxpayer Smith decides that there are plenty of things he dislikes about the way the U.S. government is run: exorbitant defense spending, collusion between business and government, mismanaged funds, and so on. As a result, he is contemplating not paying his income taxes.
   d. You and five friends are exploring some caves when a cave-in traps you all in a large chamber. The only way out is a small hole just big enough for a thin person to crawl through. Tom, who is very thick around the waist, is the first to crawl into the hole and gets stuck. For two days you all try to pull or push him out but only wedge him in tighter. The air is becoming hard to breath because oxygen is running out. One of you has a small dynamite charge that you can use to blow his body out of the hole, although this will kill him. You all must decide whether to kill him to save the five of you who are all thin people, or leave him in the hole where he will probably survive once help comes but you five will surely die in the next few hours.