

3 Utilitarianism: Making the World a Better Place



Jupiterimages/Creatas/Thinkstock

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the basic idea of the principle of utility or the greatest happiness principle.
- Explain consequentialist moral theory and what makes utilitarianism a form of consequentialism.
- Identify utilitarian moral arguments.
- Construct a utilitarian moral argument that applies to a concrete moral problem.
- Identify common misconceptions about utilitarianism and explain why they are incorrect.
- Explain the notions of impartiality, objectivity, and adaptability as they relate to utilitarianism.
- Explain the general objections to utilitarianism.
- Describe rule utilitarianism and explain how it differs from act utilitarianism.

Create all the happiness you are able to create; remove all the misery you are able to remove. Every day will allow you,—will invite you to add something to the pleasure of others,—or to diminish something of their pains. And for every grain of enjoyment you sow in the bosom of another, you shall find a harvest in your own bosom,—while every sorrow which you pluck out from the thoughts and feelings of a fellow creature shall be replaced by beautiful flowers of peace and joy in the sanctuary of your soul.

—Jeremy Bentham

3.1 Introduction to Utilitarianism

In Chapter 1, we discussed what morality is in a general sense and how to approach moral problems. In Chapter 2, we examined some challenges to the idea that our common moral values and beliefs are objective and unconditional. We considered whether they are simply a reflection of the beliefs of a certain culture or individuals. Or maybe they are mere conventions designed to maintain social order and prevent people—especially society’s stronger members—from pursuing their own interests at the expense of others, but which we would be better off defying if possible. Each of these views is quite common, yet we questioned whether they are as plausible as they might appear to be. There are a number of reasons to doubt that they can adequately make sense of the role morality plays in our individual and collective lives or whether they are rationally consistent views.

This does not mean that these views are necessarily wrong, of course. However, it gives us a compelling reason to closely examine the ways that philosophers have tried to provide an objective account of what morality is and how we should distinguish right from wrong. One of the most common and familiar of these theories is **utilitarianism**. In its most general sense, utilitarianism is the theory that morally right actions, laws, or policies are those whose consequences have the greatest positive value and least negative value compared to available alternatives.

Example Scenarios

Before exploring utilitarianism in detail, consider the following moral scenarios:

1. Amber is in a long-term relationship that lately has not been going well. She has struck up a friendship with an attractive, funny, and caring coworker, and one day he tells her that he would like to start seeing her outside of work. She knows that if she starts seeing him she would be cheating on her boyfriend, but she is tempted by the proposition and wonders whether it would be wrong to do so.
2. Charlie and Davy, 8-year-old and 5-year-old brothers, were out shopping with their mother. Shopping trips almost inevitably involve them begging for a toy, but their mother always says no. On this trip, however, they were particularly well behaved and didn’t say a word when they passed the toy aisle. Impressed and pleased, their mother, on a whim, decided to buy them a small toy to share. When they got home,

- Charlie didn't want share the toy with his brother. His mother wonders how she can explain to Charlie that sharing is the right thing to do.
3. Rachel leads the marketing team for a children's clothing company. Her bosses want to pursue a new, edgier marketing strategy that involves putting their female child models into more sexually suggestive outfits and poses. Rachel worries that this borders on exploitation of the models, promotes an inappropriate sexualization of children, and could be demeaning to women in general. Her bosses dismiss these concerns and make it clear that if she refuses to pursue the strategy, she will be let go and replaced with someone who will. The job market has been unforgiving lately, and Rachel is a single mother raising three kids, so she wonders whether the proposed marketing strategy is wrong after all—and even if it is, whether she has a responsibility to refuse to go along with it.
 4. For 3 years Bill and Jodi have been saving up for a vacation to Tahiti. They both work hard, rarely take time off, and desperately need an extended time of rest and relaxation. They have finally saved enough to take time off work, fly to Tahiti, and spend several weeks relaxing on the beach. However, as they are booking their vacation, they learn that a devastating tornado has swept through Oklahoma, wrecking several towns and leaving their inhabitants homeless and desperate. They consider the amount of money they have saved up for their vacation and wonder whether they ought to use it to help the tornado victims instead.

In each of these cases, there is the question of which choice would be moral, but there is also the question of *why* one choice would be morally better than another. In other words, different people might agree that a certain response is morally right or wrong, but they may have different *reasons* for coming to that conclusion.

Let's consider a few possible answers, along with their reasons:

Case 1:

- Amber shouldn't cheat on her boyfriend because he is bound to find out, and when he does, it will really hurt him.
- Amber shouldn't cheat on her boyfriend because he is bound to find out, and when he does, he might become angry and physically harm her.
- Amber should start dating this new guy because it will make her much happier than she is now.

Case 2:

- Charlie should share the toy with Davy because it will make Davy happy, and there will be two happy kids rather than just one.
- Charlie should share the toy with Davy so that when Davy has something Charlie wants, he'll be more likely to share it.
- Charlie should share the toy with Davy because if he does not, he will be punished.

Case 3:

- Rachel should refuse to pursue the marketing strategy because it is harmful to the models, other children, and women.

- Rachel should accept the marketing strategy because it will allow her to continue to provide for her children.
- Rachel should accept the marketing strategy because it will likely lead to increased profits for the company as well as a raise and promotion for herself.

Case 4:

- Bill and Jodi should spend their time and money helping the tornado victims rather than going to Tahiti, because the good they could do for the ravaged communities is much greater than the pleasure they would receive from basking in the sun for a few weeks.
- Bill and Jodi should spend their time and money helping the tornado victims rather than going to Tahiti, because if they don't, they will be plagued with guilt throughout their vacation.
- Bill and Jodi should spend their time and money going to Tahiti, because in doing so they will be able to work more efficiently when they return, which will result in greater income and thus greater resources to help future victims of natural disasters.

One thing to notice about each of the reasons provided for the best decision is that it appeals to the *results* of one choice or another. What will be the *outcome* of pursuing a relationship, sharing a toy, pursuing a certain marketing strategy, or spending one's time and money in a certain way? In other words, what are the *consequences* of the different available options?

You might be thinking that there are a number of choices that *don't* simply appeal to consequences, such as the idea that it is simply wrong to betray someone's trust, that we should not be selfish or greedy, that we should never sexually objectify children, that we should maintain our integrity, or that we should always strive to be compassionate toward people in need. These reasons appeal to considerations that are independent of the results of different actions—considerations such as our rights and duties or important virtues that we ought to cultivate and exercise.

Utilitarians will usually recognize the importance of most of these other reasons. But for the utilitarian, what is most *fundamental and essential* to morality are the consequences of our actions and, in particular, whether the overall positive consequences outweigh the negative ones.

Elements of a Utilitarian Theory

To flesh out this idea, let's review an important point from Chapter 1.

If we regard human actions as consisting of three aspects, then the main difference between the major moral theories has to do with which aspect the theory takes to be fundamental when it comes to moral reasoning and moral value. The three aspects of human action are:

1. The *nature and character of the person* performing the action.
2. The nature of the *action itself*.
3. The *consequences* of the action.

The three moral theories can be distinguished in this way:

1. Virtue ethics focuses on the *nature and character of the person* performing the action.
2. Deontological ethics focuses on the *action itself*.
3. Consequentialist ethics focuses on the *consequences* of the action.

When we think about the reasons mentioned above for considering certain actions or policies as right or wrong, we note that they appeal to the positive or negative consequences, outcomes, or results of each case. The form of moral reasoning that appeals to *consequences*, results, or outcomes in determining whether something is right or wrong is called consequentialist ethics (or consequentialism), and utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory.

Naturally, there are many different consequences to our actions, and not all of them will be valuable or morally significant. A consequentialist view will specify *which of the consequences are most important* when it comes to morality. For instance, someone might be fond of polka dots and favor actions or policies that bring more polka dots into our world, but that would be an absurd basis on which to judge the moral value of someone's actions. Or more realistically, someone might favor people with lighter skin tones and hold that actions or policies that favor those with lighter skin over those with darker skin are best, which most people today also regard as an absurd principle even if it once had defenders.

To avoid these kinds of problems, the consequentialist must isolate from among the various outcomes those that will serve as the standard for moral evaluation. Polka dots and skin color cannot serve as this kind of standard—but what can? Whatever it is will have to be, like polka dots and skin color, *identifiable*. That is, we must be able to recognize and indicate it in a way that others can recognize as well. But unlike polka dots and skin color, it also has to be *intrinsically valuable* (more on this in a moment).

The Basic Features of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a *consequentialist* approach to moral reasoning. This approach holds that actions are morally right if they *result in the best consequences* relative to other possible actions. If an action results in *worse consequences* than another available action, then it is *morally wrong*.

The utilitarian theory identifies the best consequences as those with the greatest overall utility.

Utility: Happiness or Well-Being

When we talk about utility, we mean some measure of well-being. This is usually happiness, which is often also defined in terms of pleasure and the absence of suffering.

Utilitarianism: The Greatest Happiness for the Greatest Number

Right actions: actions that result in the greatest overall happiness when compared with the results of alternative actions.

Wrong actions: actions that are performed when another action would have resulted in a greater overall balance of happiness and unhappiness.

Moreover, if we think back to the earlier scenarios and consider the reasons given for the different responses, they all compared results in terms of *how much* good or bad each action would produce. If we are going to distinguish between more or less of something, whatever we are comparing has to be *measurable*. So when we are distinguishing between “more of something good” or “less of something good,” we have to be able to quantify and compare different amounts of “something good.”

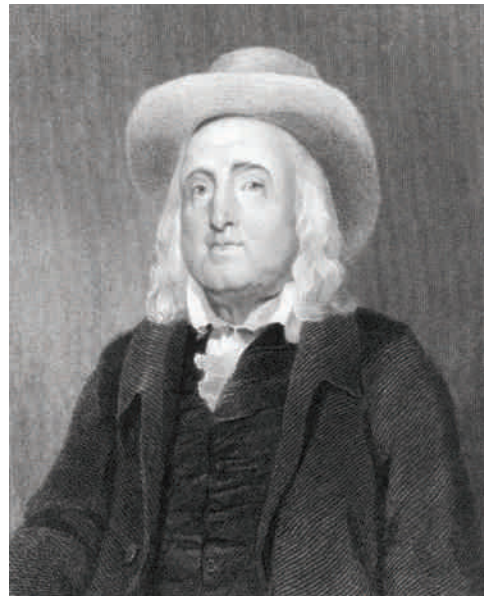
Finally, there are countless things that people find “good” or “bad,” and comparing them might seem like comparing apples to oranges. It’s not enough to quantify the results of our actions; we must be able to reduce good or bad things to a *common intrinsic value*. **Intrinsic value** is the value that something has *in itself*, as opposed to **instrumental value**, which is value that something has because it brings about something good or prevents something bad. And this intrinsic value must be a *common feature* of the outcomes we wish to compare so as to provide a standard for the comparison.

Can we identify a standard for comparing consequences that meets these criteria? Utilitarians identify this standard to be something called **utility** (hence the name utilitarianism). On this basis, the utilitarian maintains that we should act in ways that result in the most utility compared to the alternatives. But what, exactly, is utility, and does it satisfy the characteristics just described? To see how utilitarians have tried to answer this question, let’s turn to a bit of history; in particular, Jeremy Bentham’s and John Stuart Mill’s claims that utility—the ultimate value by which we compare the outcomes of actions—is happiness or, more specifically, pleasure and the absence of pain.

Bentham’s Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), a British philosopher and the founder of utilitarianism, offered a view of value known as **hedonism**, which means that we whittle down all value to happiness or unhappiness, all happiness to pleasure (good) and the absence of pain (bad), and unhappiness to pain and the absence of pleasure. Doing so, he maintained, would give us the needed basis for distinguishing good from bad consequences. Every action or policy produces a certain amount of pleasure and pain among the various individuals affected by it, so pleasure and pain would serve as the *common value*. If all values reduce to pleasure and pain, and if there are no more basic goods than pleasure and no more basic bads than pain, then pleasure is *intrinsically good* and pain is *intrinsically bad*.

Pleasure and pain, Bentham thought, can be identified and measured (like we measure flour for baking). Thus, if we add up all the pleasure that’s



Photos.com/Thinkstock

Jeremy Bentham was the founder of utilitarianism.

Common Standards

We have said that to meaningfully compare the value of different consequences, we have to find some kind of standard or unit of measurement common to all of the outcomes.

There is an old fairy tale that illustrates this principle:

A man and his wife have one possession, an old milking cow. Times are hard, and they decide that they have no choice but to sell the cow so they can have some money for food. As the man is leading the cow toward the market to sell, he passes by a peasant carrying a pair of chickens. "Say, that's a fine cow you have there," says the peasant. "I don't suppose you would like to trade your one cow for two whole chickens." The man thinks to himself, "Two is more than one, as everyone knows. This is a deal that can't be passed up!" He quickly agrees and leaves the cow with the peasant, taking the two chickens instead. By and by he meets a woman selling loaves of bread, who offers him three loaves of bread in exchange for the two chickens. Again the man reasons, "Three is more than two, as everyone knows. This woman must not be very clever to be willing to take only two chickens in exchange for three loaves of bread!" So he makes the exchange and continues on his way. A while later, he comes across an old beggar with four beans spread on a blanket. "What say you exchange those three loaves of bread for these four beans?" suggests the beggar. The man thinks to himself, "It's no wonder that he's a beggar if he doesn't even realize that four is more than three! I have never had such luck!" Just before he arrives home with his beans, he passes by a young boy playing with some rocks. The young boy spots the beans and offers the man five pebbles in exchange for the four beans. Quickly agreeing, the man runs home and excitedly proclaims to his wife, "I set off with just a single cow, and instead of selling it in the market, I traded that for *two* chickens, which then fetched me *three* loaves of bread, for which I then got *four* beans, and now I have *five* pebbles! You have, indeed, the cleverest husband in the world."

(A particularly amusing version of this tale is the poem "Smart" from Shel Silverstein's 1974 book, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, which can be found here: <https://www.marketplace.org/2009/04/27/life/poetry-project/poem-smart-shel-silverstein>).

What is wrong with this person's reasoning? Clearly, he failed to realize that quantity isn't everything: Just because a decision will result in a larger quantity of things doesn't make that decision a good one. How should he have compared, say, four beans with three loaves of bread? Some common standard would have to be invoked according to which the four beans would be considered more, less, or equal to the three loaves. Without that common standard, the decision comes down to a matter of sheer numbers, which in this case proved to be ridiculously foolish, no matter how clever the man took himself to be.

Similarly, when people disagree about whether certain actions or policies would have better results than the alternatives, is there a common standard of moral value according to which such disagreements could be resolved? If there are not, what implications might this have for a utilitarian approach to these kinds of decisions?

produced by an action and subtract the pain, we can calculate a certain value for every situation that would result from the available choices. The action that produces the greatest overall value is the morally right action. This form of moral reasoning is called **hedonistic utilitarianism**.

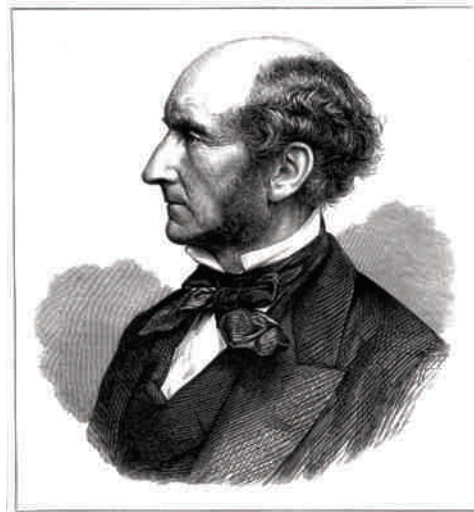
Many moral disputes involve dilemmas over how we should balance the positive and negative results of actions or policies. The ability to resolve them in an objective way, if we are to follow Bentham's procedure, depends on how well we're able to identify and measure the overall pain and pleasure that are produced, assuming that pain and pleasure are to serve as our basic standard, as Bentham proposed. As we will see later, utilitarians following Bentham came to question this assumption about pain and pleasure, but the core idea underlying utilitarianism remains the same:

Determine how much pleasure (or other positive value) minus pain (or other negative value) will result from the available actions spread across all the people affected by the actions and do that which produces the greatest overall good.

Mill's Utilitarianism

While Bentham was the founder of utilitarianism and set out its basic form, those who followed in his footsteps would modify and refine the theory. Perhaps the most well-known and influential of these was another 19th-century Englishman, John Stuart Mill. In his 1861 text, *Utilitarianism*, Mill adopted Bentham's ideas and tried to communicate and defend them in a way that was simple and straightforward and addressed the most common criticisms made of utilitarianism.

Read the sections "The Definition of Utilitarianism," "The Greatest Happiness Principle," and "Summary of the Utilitarian View" and come back to this point.



Photos.com/Thinkstock

John Stuart Mill, utilitarian philosopher.

Mill begins with a definition of morality that clearly sets out the utilitarian account of the difference between right and wrong actions.

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals "utility" or the "greatest happiness principle" holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure. (Mill, 1861/2001, p. 7)

The first question we should consider when we read this definition is "Why suppose that happiness, defined in terms of pleasure and the absence of pain, should be the standard of value when distinguishing right from wrong?" Mill answers this by offering a general theory of life, which is his primary justification for the utilitarian theory of morality. It reads: "Pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends; and . . . all desirable things . . . are desirable either for pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain" (Mill, 1861/2001, p. 7).

In other words, Mill argues that when we consider what we value, desire, or aim at, we find that it is either *pleasurable in itself* or it *leads to pleasure or to the prevention of pain*. Gaining pleasure and avoiding pain is the ultimate purpose of everything we do, according to Mill. You are reading this text, ultimately, because of pleasure or pain. Reading this text may not bring you pleasure immediately, the way that reading a gripping novel, an amusing comic strip, or a friend's birth announcement might do. And it may even be painful at times, perhaps because you find it confusing, boring, or problematic. Still, you're doing so for a certain reason, such as to fulfill a course requirement.

In turn, there may be many reasons why you are taking the course, and if we go far enough along the road of considering why you're doing so, eventually it's the prospect of pleasure and relief from pain that drives you (so Mill says). The same goes for when you go to church, get married, raise your kids, help a neighbor, vote for a certain candidate, or tie your shoes. Basically, when we ask the question "Why did you do that?," the answer always comes down to gaining pleasure or avoiding pain. So ultimately, on Mill's account, that's what happiness is: The more pleasure and less pain we have in our lives, the happier we are, and we all want happiness more than anything else.

If this is true, then it may seem that we have that common, intrinsically valuable feature of the consequences of our actions that we need to measure different outcomes and distinguish between right and wrong. As we have discussed in the previous chapters, there are countless ideas about what is good and worthwhile, what happiness is, and so on. But according to Mill, despite the differences we might have on such matters, everything comes down to pleasure and pain, and we don't pursue pleasure and avoid pain for the sake of anything else. Thus, it follows that by determining the amount of overall happiness (pleasure minus pain) that results from our actions, we can determine which consequences are best, and thus which actions are objectively moral. To put it another way, Mill thinks that the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain unites us in spite of our differences and can serve as the basis of a general, objective morality that can apply to all people.

On reading this account, many readers will no doubt protest, "Sure, a lot of what I do is for the sake of pleasure or avoiding pain, but not *everything*. Often I *sacrifice* my own pleasure or willingly *take on* pain for the sake of others." For instance, parents often sacrifice personal pleasures for the sake of their kids without a single thought given to the pleasure they might gain later. Great historical figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, or Jesus are known for having willingly endured tremendous suffering for the sake of a greater cause. Does this undermine the utilitarian account of moral action by challenging Mill's claim that happiness is the ultimate aim of our actions?

Perhaps this is so if we suppose that it's only our *own* happiness that matters to us, but this isn't what Mill means. Mill recognizes that we can often be motivated by the prospect of greater happiness (i.e., greater pleasure or less pain) *overall*. In other words, he argues that happiness *itself* can motivate our choices. This can be our own happiness, but it can just as well be the happiness of *others*. Indeed, this is exactly what we would expect if the utilitarian account of morality were true.

Remember that utilitarianism holds that if we are to live morally, we should be choosing the actions with the best *overall* outcomes. If the “best outcomes” means those that contain greatest *overall* happiness compared with the outcomes of alternative actions, then we would expect that the kinds of actions that we call noble or praiseworthy are motivated by this aspiration toward the happiness of all, even when that requires the sacrifice of one’s personal happiness.

Therefore, Mill thinks that the example of self-sacrifice supports his account, rather than undermines it. Happiness—*whether our own or that of others*—is the ultimate end of our actions, and thus it is the feature of consequences by which we compare the moral value of actions. This leads us to the original version of the utilitarian principle of morality:

Do that which results in the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Going Deeper: Higher and Lower Pleasures

Jeremy Bentham maintained that all pleasures and pains were equal in value and the only question is *how much* pleasure and pain is produced from each action. This led some critics to complain that, on the utilitarian view, a world with more pleasure is superior to a world with less pleasure, regardless of where that pleasure comes from. Does this entail that utilitarianism promotes a life of animalistic indulgence as superior to one that pursues more noble and distinctively human endeavors? John Stuart Mill did not think so, defending his position by drawing a distinction between “higher” and “lower” pleasures. See *Going Deeper: Higher and Lower Pleasures* at the end of this chapter for more.

Ethics FYI

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill was born in 1806 into a philosophical family. His father, James Mill, was a philosopher and a friend and disciple of Jeremy Bentham. James Mill and Bentham were dissatisfied with the educational system of the time and wanted to reform it so that children were raised and educated according to strict utilitarian principles.

John Stuart became a kind of experiment in such an education, and he became a child prodigy: He was helping his father edit a history of India at age 3; had read half of Plato by age 6; was fluent in several languages; and knew advanced mathematics, science, and history by the time he was a teenager.

But at age 20, as he was editing one of Bentham’s works, he had a nervous breakdown from working so hard on it. By his own account, John Stuart emerged from this condition partly by reading the poetry of William Wordsworth, and this experience led him to depart in an important way from Bentham’s theory, as described in *Going Deeper: Higher and Lower Pleasures*. Afterward, Mill became notable not just as a philosopher but as an educator and politician, and he was an influential early advocate for women’s rights.

You can read more of his own compelling and illuminating autobiography here: <https://www.utilitarianism.com/millauto>.

3.2 Putting Utilitarianism Into Practice

To review, utilitarianism maintains that morality is a matter of striving to make the world a better place by making choices that bring about the greatest overall happiness. This is a common and familiar form of reasoning in everyday life. For example, if a child shares a toy with his brother, two children will enjoy playing with it rather than just one, resulting in more overall enjoyment (and avoiding the unhappiness of the child who wouldn't get to play with it), and so we teach children to share with others. We are often compelled to help those in need even if it means a sacrifice on our part, because we recognize that our sacrifice pales in comparison to the benefits to those in need. This might involve donating time and money, but it might be something as simple as giving up one's seat on the bus to an elderly or disabled person.

Moreover, we find this kind of reasoning invoked in politics, business, and science. Think about how many political arguments appeal to the prosperity and well-being of the majority of citizens as the reason to be for or against certain policies. Much of science and medicine proceeds with the aim of bettering our lives and the world, and we find people questioning the value of scientific research when its utility isn't as apparent. In economics, especially in capitalist societies, utilitarian approaches often assume that individuals and businesses will pursue their own success and profit and that we need certain rules and regulations to ensure that this will benefit society as a whole.

Going Deeper: The Trolley Problem

What if you could save five lives in a way that results in the death of a single person? If the overall consequences were the same, would it matter if you were intentionally harming that person or not? This problem is raised by the philosopher Philippa Foot (2002c) in her famous "trolley problem." See *Going Deeper: The Trolley Problem* at the end of this chapter for more.

As we will see shortly, the familiarity of utilitarian reasoning and its conformity to many of our intuitions of what morality is ultimately all about are among its greatest strengths. Still, it's not the only form of moral reasoning we encounter or employ (which will become apparent in later chapters), so it's helpful to clarify more precisely what distinguishes a utilitarian moral argument and correct some common misconceptions.

As we will see shortly, the familiarity of utilitarian reasoning and its conformity to many of our intuitions of what morality is ultimately all about are among its greatest strengths. Still, it's not the only form of moral reasoning we encounter or employ (which will become apparent in later chapters), so it's helpful to clarify more precisely what distinguishes a utilitarian moral argument and correct some common misconceptions.

How Can I Recognize or Construct a Utilitarian Moral Argument?

Typically, an argument that says "*This is the right thing to do because it will lead to good results*" is a utilitarian argument. So is one that says "*This is wrong because it will bring about bad results.*" This isn't always the case, since other ways of thinking about ethics often appeal to the value of the consequences. The difference is that for the utilitarian, the appeal to the good or bad results is *the primary or overriding reason* for regarding some action, law, or policy as right or wrong. Moreover, we should consider whether the argument is taking into consideration the good or bad results *overall* among all those affected (rather than the good or bad results for an individual or a particular group). This involves *comparing the positive and negative utility of alternative actions* and determining what the overall balance is among those alternatives.

When we encounter these arguments in real life, people will usually appeal to positive and/or negative consequences as the reason for or against an action or policy, but often they won't carefully compare the positive consequences with the negative ones, or vice versa. This is what we, as people who care about the reasons for certain actions and policies, might have to fill in.

Examples From Political Debates

In the following examples, we can see utilitarian reasoning at work in justifying a certain action or policy (in red) by appealing to the overall balance of good or bad consequences (in blue).

“Same-sex couples should be allowed to marry because it makes them happy and doesn't hurt anyone else.”

This argument looks first at the happiness gained by same-sex couples if they are allowed to marry and assumes that the only reason they should not be allowed to marry is if the negative consequences outweigh that happiness. If they don't, then according to the utilitarian, there is no reason not to allow them to marry.

“All nations need to work together to combat climate change; otherwise, the devastation will be severe and far-reaching.”

In this example, the argument does not appeal directly to any *particular* consequences like happiness or pleasure; we need to fill in those details. The implication is that according to *some* standard that we all share, climate change will have severely negative consequences, so nations have an obligation to minimize those negative consequences.

Examples From Everyday Life

“I should make sure that the lights are turned off before I leave my home to conserve energy.”

Someone reasoning in this way might only be concerned with her electric bill, but she might also be thinking of the impact that her actions have on the community, nation, or planet. Either way, the reasoning behind turning off the lights is similar: If I turn off the lights, I'm contributing to the overall reduction of my electrical bill, even if this particular instance won't make much of an impact on my monthly statement. Likewise, if I turn off the lights, I'm contributing to the overall reduction of climate change, even if this particular instance won't make much of an impact.

In both cases the idea is that *if I'm to contribute to the best overall consequences, I should do X*. Utilitarianism maintains that we have an obligation to choose those actions that contribute to the best world overall, so if turning off the lights contributes to the reduction of global warming (even if the contribution is minimal), then I have an obligation to do so (unless leaving the lights on has positive consequences that outweigh this contribution).

“Don’t cheat on your boyfriend, because it will really hurt him if he finds out.”

The reasoning might be that the potential pain the boyfriend might experience if he finds out outweighs the pleasures gained through cheating.

“Share that toy with your brother so that when he has something you want, he’ll share with you.”

We might give this instruction to encourage a child to look beyond the immediate satisfaction he could enjoy by hogging a toy and consider the fact that, in the long run, both children will be happier if they share their toys.

Examples From Science, Medicine, the Military, and Business

The following statements offer a sampling of reasons frequently given for or against various actions and policies in other areas of life that, when considered as the primary, overriding argument, would characteristically represent utilitarian moral reasoning. It’s important to note that there are many other considerations regarding the consequences of various possible actions that may need to be examined, and including them might lead some utilitarians to disagree with these conclusions. Therefore, these statements do not necessarily represent what *all* utilitarians would think, and a full utilitarian defense of certain actions or policies would need to be more drawn out.

Moreover, as we said before, those who are not utilitarians will often use reasoning that appeals to the best outcomes, the difference being that these reasons aren’t *decisive* as they are for the utilitarian; as you read these, you may think about nonutilitarian reasons and considerations that seem important. With that in mind, think about how the kinds of arguments offered here embody the sort of moral reasoning defended by Bentham, Mill, and other utilitarians.

“Genetically modifying crops and animals will allow farmers to produce more food on less land, with less expense, and using fewer toxic pesticides, fertilizers, and antibiotics.”

“Genetically modifying crops and animals will introduce more problems into the food system than it would alleviate.”

“If we perform medical experiments on animals, it can lead to medical breakthroughs that would benefit millions of people.”

“The suffering caused to animals as a result of cosmetic testing outweighs the pleasure that people will gain from wearing those cosmetics, especially when there are alternative means of testing that have similar benefits with less suffering.”

“Using drones to take out the families of terrorists will demoralize the terrorists and force them to surrender more quickly, thereby saving many more lives.”

“Using drones to take out the families of terrorists will inspire others to join the terrorists’ cause, thereby prolonging the conflict even further.”

“By outsourcing labor to other countries, a business can earn a greater profit and provide jobs to people in countries that are much poorer than we are in America.”

“Outsourcing labor to other countries results in loss of jobs and tax revenue at home and tends to provide significant benefits only to those who are already wealthy.”

3.3 Common Misconceptions

Now that we have a better sense of how utilitarian reasoning works, let’s address two common misconceptions about utilitarianism.

Misconception 1: The Good of the Individual Doesn’t Matter

Does utilitarianism maintain that an individual’s good is less important than that of the majority? Not quite. First, a crucial feature of utilitarianism is an emphasis on **equal consideration**: Any particular person’s happiness or suffering is no more important or less important than that of anyone else; both are to be counted equally. Everyone experiences happiness and suffering, so the crucial question is how much there is overall, not whose it is.

However, when we are considering all the people affected by an action and how they are affected, we might find that the experiences of a particular individual are *outweighed* by those of others, whether another individual or a larger group. Again, it’s not that the others *matter* more; rather, when everyone’s experiences are counted equally and added up, the numbers often work out in favor of the majority.

It’s similar to the way we think of money. All dollar bills have equal value, but if one action results in 10 dollar bills gained and 1 lost, and another action results in 1 dollar bill gained but 10 lost, then that first action is better from a financial standpoint. But we don’t believe that the dollar bill we lost is “less valuable” than any of the others.

In similar fashion, if Action A results in happiness for 10 people and unhappiness for 1 person, and Action B results in happiness for 1 person and unhappiness for 10 people, then Action A will usually be the right choice.

But is this always the case? This brings us to the second misconception.

Misconception 2: The Majority Always Rules

Does utilitarianism always require that we sacrifice the good of the individual or minority for that of the majority? No. While it’s true that this is sometimes the case (and can be a source of worry about utilitarianism), moral choices are not always a “majority rules” kind of matter.



DuxX/iStock/Thinkstock

A common misconception regarding utilitarianism is that the majority always rules, but this is not the case. For instance, even though the majority might benefit slightly from cheaper berries, that does not necessarily justify the larger amount of suffering experienced by mistreated or underpaid laborers.

Remember that we're concerned with the greatest happiness (and least suffering) overall. There might be situations in which an action brings a relatively trivial amount of pleasure to a large number of people but a great deal of suffering to a few. It might be the case that the suffering of the individual or minority is so great that it outweighs the value of the happiness gained by the majority.

For example, the practice of slavery might have been advantageous to the White majority, but overall the tremendous suffering experienced by Black people outweighed those advantages, even though Black people were in the minority. The only way to justify slavery, then, would have been to accord less weight or no weight at all to the experiences of Black people, violating the principle of equal consideration.

In modern times, farm laborers and factory workers in America and other countries often have to work in wretched conditions for little pay so that the majority of others can obtain cheaper food and merchandise. This raises the question of whether the pleasure the majority might experience from inexpensive food, gadgets, toys, and so on outweighs the suffering experienced by those on whose labor these items depend. Or, to take a positive example, members of a community may sacrifice a portion of their time, money, and possessions to help a family devastated by illness or a disaster, recognizing that the small sacrifice of many is far outweighed by the great benefit to that one family.

As we will see in later chapters, some would argue that the reasons to oppose slavery, pay a little extra for products produced in humane conditions, or help a neighbor in need are not primarily utilitarian but reflect other forms of ethical reasoning. Be that as it may, the important point here is that when utilitarians say we ought to aim at the greatest happiness, they insist that the interests and experiences of all should be counted equally, which may lead to the judgment that the happiness or suffering of the minority outweighs the happiness or suffering of the majority.

3.4 Strengths of Utilitarianism

Few people would object to Jeremy Bentham's admonition at the beginning of the chapter to strive to bring about as much happiness and remove as much misery as we can. Moreover, since the earliest days of recorded human history, philosophers, cultures, and religions have accorded a central place to human happiness and well-being. It's hard to deny the

corresponding idea that a world with *more* happiness is better than a world with less. Three other features of the utilitarian approach to moral reasoning are often touted as important strengths of this approach; namely, its impartiality, its affinity with scientific objectivity, and its adaptability.

Impartiality

As we have already discussed, there are many accounts of what happiness and well-being actually mean, and these differences have led to discord, oppression, and violence. More generally, cultures and societies have clashed for ages over ideas about how people should live, what kinds of things are required or prohibited, and so on. This brings us to a notable strength of utilitarianism: its **impartiality**. That is, utilitarianism offers us an account of morality that does not give preference to the beliefs, values, or interests of any particular individual or group when it comes to moral judgments or decisions; rather, these judgments and decisions are based on something common to all.



Rawpixel/iStock/Thinkstock

One of the strengths of utilitarianism is that it is impartial; it attempts to be independent of individual or cultural beliefs.

Mill (1861/2001), for instance, attempts to reconcile religious views of morality with secular ones by proposing that “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, utility is not only not a godless doctrine, but more profoundly religious than any other” (p. 22). Mill’s thought is that utilitarian theory expresses a standard of conduct that is common to all religions as well as to those without religious convictions and that is common to all cultures and societies more generally; namely, that we should do what we can to increase happiness and minimize suffering in the world.

This holds particular attraction to us today. We live in a world that is increasingly globalized, in which confrontation between cultures around the world, diversity within particular societies, and awareness of different belief systems is greater than ever before. It is ever more incumbent on us to seek a way to reconcile these differences and find solutions to problems that appeal to all. Or, more modestly, we should strive to find ways forward that, even if they don’t appeal to everyone, are not simply attempts to foist the ideals of one culture or belief system on another but can be justified independently of particular customs, belief systems, or points of view.

As we saw in Chapter 2, a stance of relativism about moral value cannot adequately address the dilemmas that arise in a world in which increasing contact between different value systems call for concrete decisions about which ends and values should prevail when regulating our common life. Utilitarianism endeavors to articulate a standard by which we can distinguish right from wrong and just from unjust without favoring one set of religious or cultural convictions over another.

Objectivity

This endeavor aligns utilitarianism with another common contemporary ideal; namely, its objectivity, or more specifically, its conformity to scientific rationality. As we know from debates over evolution, climate change, genetically modified foods, and similar controversial issues, not everyone agrees with the conclusions of mainstream scientific research. But even those who contest the findings of the majority of the scientific community on such issues typically try to defend their views in conformity with scientific standards, suggesting that such standards have a special kind of authority when it comes to justifying claims about what is or is not the case. This is partially because modern science employs certain procedures of investigation that are aimed at eliminating bias and prejudice.

Utilitarianism aims to mirror scientific objectivity by offering a theory of morality grounded in empirical observation (e.g., how much happiness and suffering is produced or eliminated by an action) and governed by an objective procedure (e.g., maximize happiness or minimize suffering). This can ground claims that a moral judgment is *objectively* true or false regardless of what others believe. For example, in a utilitarian view an action may be *objectively right* if that action *in fact* results in the greatest overall good, even if someone makes a different judgment. Following such a procedure can be an important way to ensure that our ethical judgments are based on evidence and good critical thinking, rather than merely expressing personal attitudes, cultural biases, and the like.

The attractiveness of this possibility is not hard to appreciate. When we consider the conflicts that cause the most strife in our contemporary world (as well as those throughout history that have led to suffering, death, destruction, and impeded progress), we can see how biases toward one's own kind (race, religion, gender, social status, etc.) and prejudices in favor of one's own form of life (including the rules and standards by which it is governed) play a central role. A theory of moral judgment that aims to reduce or eliminate such biases and prejudices would hold great attraction in our contemporary world, and by basing its approach to moral questions on the approach of the natural sciences, utilitarianism makes a strong claim to be an effective way of achieving that aim.

Moreover, biases and prejudices toward one's own kind aren't restricted to differences among humans: Utilitarians are especially noteworthy for extending the scope of our ethical concern to other animals, as we will see in detail in a later chapter. Animals experience pleasure and pain, form relationships, and are capable of flourishing or suffering. If (as the utilitarian would say) the standard for how we ought to live involves maximizing positive experiences and minimizing negative ones *regardless of who experiences them*, then we have reason to care about the experiences of nonhuman animals and accord them equal weight to our own when determining the optimal action.

Adaptability

One final attraction to note is utilitarianism's **adaptability**: Utilitarianism seems to allow us to adapt our moral judgments to particular circumstances in a way that a more rigid system of moral rules would not. For example, most of us recognize a general moral duty not to lie. However, there are circumstances in which lying may seem to some people to be the morally right thing to do.

Suppose, for instance, that you are a Christian living in Europe during the time of Nazi activity and knew that the Nazis were rounding up Jewish people for torture and extermination in concentration camps. Your Jewish friend and his family are hiding in a secret room in your house, and some Nazi soldiers knock on your door asking if you know where any Jews might be hiding. If you told them the truth, your friends would be sent off to one of those barbaric concentration camps.

Most people would say that the right thing to do in such a circumstance is to tell the soldiers no to protect your friends from such horrors, even though it would involve lying. The utilitarian can say that even though lying *normally* leads to bad consequences, in this case it would lead to *better* consequences than telling the truth and thus would be the right thing to do. In more general terms, the utilitarian can say that no two circumstances are exactly the same, and thus no rule or moral standard will necessarily apply in all cases. Basing morality on the *consequences* of an action allows us to judge each circumstance on a case-by-case basis.

In short, utilitarianism holds strong appeal, especially in the contemporary world in which we have to make decisions and set policies that affect people with different religious and cultural views; place trust in the standards of empirical, scientific rationality; and are often forced to make difficult choices that require flexibility in how we judge particular circumstances.

Does this show that utilitarianism provides the best account of how we ought to live and the decisions we should be making, whether as individuals or as a society? Many philosophers have said no, and we now turn to examine a few of their main reasons.

3.5 Objections to Utilitarianism

For all the strengths of the utilitarian approach to moral reasoning, there are several significant objections that need to be considered before determining whether it is the best way to approach or justify responses to moral problems.

General Objections

We can start by looking back at the conditions a consequentialist theory like utilitarianism must satisfy that we introduced at the beginning of the chapter. If we're going to distinguish right and wrong actions in terms of their consequences in the way utilitarianism does, we will need to *identify* what it is about the consequences of our actions that matter morally. Whatever this is must be *measurable* so as to allow for meaningful comparison, must be a *common* feature of the different outcomes we're comparing, and must be *intrinsically valuable*. Many critics of utilitarianism object that it does not or cannot satisfy one or more of these conditions. Let's look at a few examples.

Start with the most familiar form of utilitarianism—that morally right actions produce the most happiness and least suffering relative to the alternatives. The questions that need to be addressed include the following:

1. What are happiness and suffering?
2. Can we objectively identify and measure happiness and suffering?
3. Why are these the most important things? Are they intrinsically valuable, and if so, are they the only things that are intrinsically valuable?

The difficulty with question 1 is that people provide very different answers to it, if they can provide an answer at all (many people are unsure of what these terms actually mean). As we remember from a previous discussion, when we're considering the amount of happiness that results from an action, especially one that affects many people, we need to be able to make meaningful comparisons with the amount of happiness that results from alternative actions—which means the comparison has to be about the *same thing* in multiple cases. But if happiness means one thing to one person and another thing to another person, are we capable of making that kind of comparison? Let's call this the *problem of pluralism about happiness*.

If we can provide an account of happiness that is based on something common to all of the different views, this could be seen as a strength of the utilitarian theory. This is why Bentham and Mill defined *happiness* as “pleasure and the absence of pain.” If we are to suppose that for all the variation in people's views about happiness, everyone ultimately desires pleasure and the absence of pain for its own sake rather than for the sake of anything else, then we can solve the problem of pluralism about happiness. But were Bentham and Mill right?

We might worry that the same problem of pluralism that pertains to happiness pertains to pleasure as well. Even Mill believed that there were different *kinds* of pleasure, some of them inherently higher than others. What's more, some would argue that pleasure is always connected with a particular kind of activity, and it's not clear that we can isolate from those activities some common feeling or experience that is the same no matter where we find it. Is the pleasure associated with sexual activity the same kind of experience as the pleasure associated with watching a disturbing but well-made movie, and is either of these the same as the pleasure some people associate with mowing the lawn, watching their child's piano recital, or figuring out a solution to a difficult problem at work? Even though we might associate the term *pleasure* with such a diversity of experiences, it's not clear that this term refers to a feeling or emotion that is common to all of them.

Even less clear is how we should measure the quantity of pleasure. Is it measured in terms of how intense it is, how long it lasts, or some other factor? How do we determine what these quantities will be among all of the people affected by an action?

Even if we could isolate some common feeling or emotion to determine how pleasure should be measured, it's not clear that this would represent the intrinsically valuable feature of consequences that the utilitarian needs. Intuitively, the mere fact that someone *finds* a certain kind of pleasure good does not mean it *actually is* good. We need only consider the pleasure of a rapist or pedophile or the pleasure that someone gets from torturing animals to question whether pleasure is always good, or we may even, with Mill, suppose that simple or “swine-like” pleasures are not as valuable as those associated with our higher faculties.

We may express this by saying that “desired doesn't mean desirable.” In other words, the fact that someone happens to desire something does not make it *worthy* of desire; that is, *good*.

Indeed, many have argued that when we consider the values and goods that we recognize as deeply important to human life, it would be a mistake to reduce them to *any* single quality or characteristic, much less to pleasure and pain.

For reasons like this, many philosophers (including some utilitarians) have concluded that “happiness” is too varied or pluralistic to allow for meaningful comparison of the value of different consequences. Defining happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain does not solve this problem; indeed, it makes the problem more difficult. Now, you might be thinking, *Why not just leave it up to the individual to determine what happiness means and compare how much happiness—however each person defines it—is brought about by the action?* This is an attractive option that some utilitarian philosophers have favored, choosing to use the term *preferences* rather than *happiness* to identify what should be maximized by our actions (for which reason such a view is often called **preference utilitarianism**; Singer, 2011).

However, preference utilitarianism is open to the kind of worry just described: The mere fact that people have certain preferences does not make those preferences *good*. If the majority of people in a community *prefer* the subjugation of a certain race or religion, would that be enough to justify laws that enforced this subjugation? Or should those preferences be disregarded or accorded less weight? If so, on what basis do we make this judgment, if the ultimate standard for moral judgment is people’s preferences themselves?

Moreover, critics might say that basing our standard of conduct on preferences excludes from consideration the good of those who cannot have preferences. Consider young babies; people with severe mental impairments; and most animals, plants, and nonliving things—none of these can be said to have preferences in the way intended by preference utilitarianism, but we frequently speak of them as having dignity or value in themselves, independent of anyone’s feelings or preferences.

Going Deeper: Desired Versus Desirable

Is the fact that people desire something enough to show that it is desirable, as Mill claimed about happiness? Or to put it differently, do some things have value in themselves independent of whether people happen to value them? This is an ancient question, and one of the earliest and most famous versions was raised by the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato in a dialogue called the *Euthyphro*. See *Going Deeper: Desired Versus Desirable* at the end of the chapter for more.

Preference Utilitarianism

Recall that Jeremy Bentham initially proposed that *utility* meant *happiness*, which he further defined as pleasure and the absence of pain. John Stuart Mill accepted this basic idea but distinguished between higher and lower pleasures on the basis of what most people would *prefer* if they had experience of both kinds of pleasure. Some utilitarians have taken this further by maintaining that *people’s preferences themselves* should be what moral actions ought to bring about as much as possible. The result is a view called preference utilitarianism. This is the idea that morally right actions are those that allow as many preferences to be satisfied as possible.

If we ought to be maximizing preferences, what should we say when people's preferences involve the degradation or destruction of beings that don't have preferences? What if a person would prefer to use a work of art as a doormat, a group of people's preference for a shopping mall requires the destruction of an ancient forest, or a person would prefer not to have the burden of an unwanted baby or an incapacitated parent? Since works of art, ancient forests, babies, and incapacitated adults cannot have preferences (or at least preferences like those of normal human adults), it may seem that preference utilitarianism commits us to the view that their good is less worthy of consideration, a conclusion that strikes some critics as disturbing and wrong.



Aletopus/iStock/Thinkstock

Some critics of preference utilitarianism object that it fails to consider the good of entities that don't have preferences, such as the environment.

We've considered the objection that there is no single, unitary feature by which we can evaluate the relative value of different consequences because the proposed candidates either cannot be objectively identified and measured (as in the case of pleasure or happiness) or are not obviously valuable in themselves (as in the case of mere preferences or personal conceptions of happiness). Utilitarians and other consequentialists have offered a wide variety of alternative ways to characterize the best consequences of our actions, and indeed few contemporary philosophers follow Mill and Bentham in maintaining that pleasure, or even happiness, is the exclusive good that we should seek to bring about. However, if there is no well-defined and justified account of the best consequences, reasoning that proceeds along the lines of maximizing utility may lead to conclusions about our moral responsibilities that appear, intuitively, to be wrong. In particular, this approach may seem to neglect or undermine certain core features of our moral lives; namely, respect for persons and the irreducible plurality of values.

Respect for Persons

Earlier in the chapter, we noted that an attractive feature of utilitarianism is that it doesn't designate certain specific actions as always right or always wrong but allows for some flexibility, depending on the outcomes of the actions. Thus, an action like lying, which is normally wrong, might be right when it's done to save someone from much greater suffering, as in the case of lying to a Nazi soldier in order to save your Jewish friend.

However, while this flexibility can be an attraction, it can also be a possible weakness. Consider a case in which following utilitarian reasoning may justify something that, to many people, would seem wrong.

Suppose five people are brought to a hospital with a life-threatening condition, and each requires an immediate transplant of a different organ to survive (one needs a kidney, another needs a lung, etc.). If they don't receive their transplant soon, they will die. There's not enough time to wait for any donated organs to come in, and the hospital doesn't have anything on hand, so if the hospital doesn't locate five healthy replacement organs in the next few hours, five people will die.

It just so happens that Sally has come in to have a broken arm fixed. The doctor knows of the situation with the five people, and after running Sally's vitals, he concludes that Sally's organs would serve perfectly to save the lives of the five people. If he harvests Sally's organs, he could save the five lives, but Sally would die. But suppose the doctor is a committed utilitarian and reasons that "five lives saved and one life lost is a better outcome than one life saved and five lives lost." In other words, he reasons that the best overall happiness would result from killing Sally, taking her organs, and saving the lives of the five people.

If it's true that killing Sally to save the five lives results in more overall happiness than not killing Sally and allowing them to die, does this mean that the doctor's actions are morally right? Most people would say no. However, if we are to simply consider which outcome contains the greatest happiness for the greatest number, then what would stop us from saying yes?

This particular scenario might seem far-fetched, but the general sort of dilemma it describes is not. Many ethical dilemmas involve choices between ordinary moral standards and the greater good, including cases in which achieving the greater good requires us to harm or even end someone's life. If this raises a problem for utilitarianism, how might we specify what that problem is?

One response might be to say that while killing Sally to harvest her organs would save lives, it goes against morality. The thought might be that *morality* involves respecting certain rules like "don't kill an innocent person," and since killing Sally would violate that rule, doing so is wrong even if leads to a greater overall outcome.

However, we must remember that utilitarianism is an account of what morality and moral reasoning *actually is*. One cannot simply object that utilitarianism fails to respect moral rules, because utilitarians claim that an account of morality centered on consequences is superior to one centered on rules. Rather, we might indicate what is troubling about a case like Sally's by suggesting that *utilitarianism fails to respect the value of individual persons*.

Earlier in the chapter, we considered the worry that by making happiness the standard of moral action, we undermine the *sacrifice* of happiness displayed by many people we admire, such as Gandhi or Jesus. The utilitarian response emphasized that it's not any particular *individual's* happiness that matters but the happiness *overall*, which is why we admire the sacrifice of figures like Gandhi and Jesus.

However, when we consider the difference between Sally, on the one hand, and Gandhi and Jesus on the other, an important distinction emerges: The sacrifice of people like Gandhi and Jesus was *voluntary*, whereas Sally's sacrifice was not. Some critics of utilitarianism maintain that morality requires us to always respect the dignity and autonomy of individual persons and that this overrides the value of good consequences when the two come in conflict.

To take another example, suppose that a military unit is in a battle and a grenade lands in the middle of a group of soldiers. Jesse sees the grenade and immediately throws himself on top of it, shielding the other soldiers from the blast while sacrificing his own life. We would consider this to be an act of the highest valor and honor, and Jesse would be remembered and esteemed long after. Suppose, however, that Jesse is standing next to Drew. Jesse has a wife and four kids, while Drew has no family. Drew is also a bit of a liability at times—clumsy, not terribly bright, and rather unreliable—while Jesse is a model soldier with great prospects in the military. When the grenade lands, Jesse reaches over and throws Drew on top of the grenade, which again shields the other soldiers but kills Drew. Would we honor Jesse for this act the same way we would if he had thrown himself on the grenade? After all, the *outcome* was the same in both cases—one person died, and the rest survived. Indeed, it was probably *better* in the case where Jesse sacrificed Drew instead of himself, given the broader circumstances.

Most people would not honor Jesse for this deed but instead maintain that he did something terribly wrong or cowardly. But if it's not the consequences that account for this difference in judgment, what does account for it? Again, many would suppose that Jesse fails to respect the value of Drew as an individual person, particularly Drew's right to choose for himself whether to sacrifice his life in this way. In similar fashion, some have argued that by fixating on the consequences alone, utilitarianism does not adequately respect the rights, dignity, and value of individual persons themselves.

The worry, in other words, is that in the utilitarian view, moral value has to do with something *about* a person—how much happiness or suffering he or she experiences, how many preferences he or she is able to satisfy, and so on. The person *himself or herself* does not have value except as a source of these experiences and qualities, either as the one experiencing them or the one producing them. This stands in contrast to systems of morality, like the one we will consider in Chapter 4, that consider the individual to have a special value or dignity independent of any characteristics, experiences, or potential to contribute to the overall good.

Irreducible Plurality of Values

One way of expressing the objection to the utilitarian view that we just considered is by claiming that the value of human life itself is *incommensurable* with the value of pleasure, happiness, or whatever other basic unit of utility that we identify. That is, the value of human life cannot be measured in a way that's comparable to some quantity of overall pleasure or happiness, because they are irreducibly different *kinds* of value. In similar fashion, some critics of utilitarianism have maintained that there are many sources of value that humans recognize that provide meaning and purpose to our lives and place moral demands on us (Taylor, 1985). None of these can be reduced to any of the others for the purposes of objective measurement or calculation, and respecting these values isn't simply a matter of trying to bring about as much or as little of something as one can.

Some of these values may include relationships like friendships, families, and communal ties; arenas of human excellence like crafts, the arts, knowledge, invention, and discovery; personal qualities like virtue, honor, and integrity; aesthetic values like beauty; and the many values related to religion and spirituality. While it's true that many of these provide pleasure

and happiness, for most people that's not the *source* of their value, as if they would no longer be valuable if they no longer gave pleasure or made people happy. Similarly, according to many people, the value these things have doesn't lie in the fact that people happen to find them valuable; rather, they would insist that people find them valuable *because* they have value. Therefore, to reduce them to one *common* value in a way that would allow for objective calculation and comparison of consequences would be to greatly misconstrue how we understand the value of these features of our lives and the world.

To be sure, we frequently have to weigh these values against each other and against pleasure, suffering, and the like. These are often agonizing decisions that bring in questions of identity, purpose, meaning, authority, and many others—questions to which we often lack clear answers and in some cases suspect there are no absolute, objective answers. Therefore, such questions stand in contrast to the kinds of questions and dilemmas that are faced in science and mathematics, where we assume that with enough effort and ingenuity, we can find an objective answer.

If we recall from our earlier discussion, a strength of utilitarianism is that it aims to bring to morality a similar kind of objectivity and neutrality of judgment that characterizes the natural sciences, where certain procedures help eliminate and overcome bias and prejudice. And surely some of the values and goods that we have been identifying as supposedly irreducible, like one's ties to a community or those associated with religious and cultural traditions, have been and continue to be sources of bias and prejudice, not to mention oppression and subjugation.

This presents us with some difficult questions that cut to the heart of the basic question of ethics: *How should one live?* To see how this might make a difference to our moral decision making, consider an ordinary case in which someone must decide what to do with a sudden increase in income (perhaps she has been given a substantial raise or received a significant inheritance). Suppose she had been living comfortably before this windfall. What would be the moral thing to do with the extra money?

One option might be to consider only one's own needs and desires. One might use the money to pay off debts, buy a bigger house and nicer cars, go on vacation, throw a lavish party, and so on. Another option would be to benefit people and causes one cares about: Establish a fund for one's kids' college educations; donate to one's church or a local homeless shelter or clinic; or donate to an art museum or college, a favored political candidate, or an organization that supports causes one believes in like the National Rifle Association, Planned Parenthood, or Doctors Without Borders. Or one might do extensive research to determine how this money might best be used to eliminate poverty, cure diseases, or promote justice and spend the money to support that goal regardless of whether it benefits oneself or someone one knows personally.

Most people would be inclined to say that some combination of all of these would be a legitimate way to make use of the extra money. But would that be the case if one was to reason in terms of utilitarian morality? It's certainly not clear if any of the uses that primarily benefit *oneself* would be morally justified. Clearly, the money one uses to buy a bigger house or throw a party would not contribute to the greatest overall good when compared to the suffering that the same amount of money could alleviate. But matters become even more difficult when we compare using the money to alleviate suffering to using the money to benefit the arts or to send one's kids to college. Or what if we were to determine that while giving money to a local homeless shelter will help alleviate suffering in one's own community, giving the same amount money to

an orphanage or aid organization on the other side of the world would have similar outcomes for a much greater number of people? Would we be morally obliged to opt for the latter?

This is the conclusion that some utilitarians have defended on the grounds of strict equality and impartiality, which we noted earlier as a strength of utilitarianism. In Bentham's formula, "everybody [is] to count for one, nobody for more than one" (as cited in Mill, 1861/2001, p. 62), to which Mill (1861/2001) himself adds, "as between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator" (p. 17). More recently, the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer (1972) has argued that

it makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away. . . . If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him). (pp. 231–232)

The claim seems to be that when we consider our moral responsibilities, we must adopt a point of view in which we leave aside anything particular about ourselves—our interests, desires, relationships, and so on—and assume the role of a spectator that objectively measures the good and bad results from different actions and calculates which action will have the overall optimal outcome. If, from this point of view, we judge that giving a certain amount of money to an aid organization in India or Rwanda will eliminate more suffering overall than giving that money to an aid organization in our own community, then that's the moral choice. And if the suffering alleviated by this action outweighs the happiness generated from giving to an art gallery or sending one's child to college, then again, one's moral obligation is to do the first.

Some people find this to be an attraction of utilitarianism, while others find it disturbing or dehumanizing. Part of being human, a critic may argue, is having an identity constituted in part by commitments and relationships that we nurture and support, producing and enjoying the arts, gaining knowledge and understanding for its own sake rather than its usefulness, and much else besides. Does utilitarianism end up reducing this picture of humans as having complexity and depth to a picture of humans as calculating machines?

3.6 Varieties of Utilitarianism

It should be emphasized that utilitarians have addressed such worries in various ways, sometimes by arguing that these problems do not actually follow from utilitarian theory, sometimes by modifying utilitarian theory in ways that avoid them, and sometimes by arguing that these implications of utilitarian theory are not problems with the theory but problems with our assumptions about what a moral theory should conclude or imply. Examining these responses would take us beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that utilitarianism, and consequentialism more broadly, is a theory of morality with many variations that have emerged as defenders of its basic form—identifying moral action with bringing about the best outcomes—have sought to address and meet the kinds of objections we have been discussing, as well as others we were unable to cover. Here is a brief sampling of some of these variations:

- Some philosophers have distinguished between a *standard* of right action and a *guide* to action, maintaining that while utilitarianism represents the correct standard by which to distinguish right from wrong, it shouldn't be the guide that we use when making decisions. Indeed, some have gone so far as to argue that we are more likely to bring about a better world when most people *don't* accept or act on utilitarian principles (Sidgwick, 1907).
- Many philosophers propose a variety of values other than utility as that which we should be aim to bring about, such as justice, virtue, or a simple and irreducible property of goodness (Moore, 1903/1993).
- Some utilitarians maintain that the standard of right action should be the *actual* consequences produced by our actions, while others hold that it should be the *expected* or *foreseen* consequences that make actions right. If someone acts in a way that he reasonably expects to have the best results but actually does not, we could still regard his action as morally right if it's just the *expected* consequences that matter. However, if the *actual* consequences matter, his action would be morally wrong (though we may think we shouldn't blame the person for that).
- Utilitarians often disagree on how far-reaching the consequences for which we are responsible should be. Does moral responsibility pertain only to the immediate effects of one's action, to effects that are far-off and remote, or somewhere in between?

So as we can see, there are many ways in which we might refine and revise the theory, especially in light of problems that are raised. However, there is one final variation that is prominent and influential enough to be worth highlighting as we close out this chapter.

Rule Utilitarianism

One of the objections against utilitarianism is that it would seem to permit or even demand actions and policies that appear to be unjust, such as the subjugation and oppression of minorities, the sacrifice of innocent lives for the sake of the greater good, or some other action or policy that intuitively seems wrong even if it is for the sake of the greater good. Some utilitarians agreed that this is a problem worth taking seriously and have responded by forming a distinction between **act utilitarianism** and **rule utilitarianism**.

Act utilitarianism, which is the form that we have been considering throughout the chapter, maintains that our moral responsibility is to do those *particular acts* that produce the greatest overall good for the greatest number, given the available alternatives in each circumstance. Rule utilitarianism, by contrast, proposes that we should do those acts that produce the greatest good when followed

Rule Versus Act Utilitarianism

An important distinction within the utilitarian approach to moral reasoning is between *act utilitarianism* and *rule utilitarianism*. Here is the basic difference:

Act utilitarianism: the morally right action is the one that leads to the greatest happiness for the greatest number in each particular circumstance.

Rule utilitarianism: the morally right action is the one that would lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number when followed as a general rule.

as a general rule. In other words, instead of asking which action *here and now* would have the best consequences, we should be considering which *rules* society should adopt to maximize overall utility. If everyone would be better off by adopting a particular rule than by not adopting it, then our moral responsibility is to act in accordance with that rule.

Consider, by way of example, certain actions taken in war. Suppose that we go to war to overthrow a brutal regime that engages in torture, kills innocent civilians, has no respect for political authorities or boundaries, and so on, and that stopping these atrocities is the reason we are going to war. Suppose further that the quickest, most efficient means of achieving victory—the means that minimize casualties, damage, and costs—is by engaging in some of those very activities that we are striving against, such as torture and targeting innocent civilians.

For the act utilitarian, if torturing a person or killing an innocent civilian here and now is the best way to ensure fewer people are tortured and killed in the future, then that's the morally right thing to do. But for the rule utilitarian, the fact that we are trying to prevent these things shows that a world without torture or the killing of innocents would be best, and so we ought to follow the rule that prohibits them; that is, we shouldn't do them ourselves (Brandt, 1972).

While rule utilitarianism may help address problems like the ones we discussed, it has not been widely endorsed. Part of the reason, critics argue, is that it undermines the essence of utilitarianism itself, which is to aim at doing the most good and bringing about the best consequences through one's actions. Rule utilitarianism limits us to those actions that *would* have the best results if everyone acted accordingly, but of course, not everyone *does* act accordingly. What we are left with is a standard of action that is motivated by the aim to bring about the best consequences but that often requires us to deliberately act contrary to that aim. Because of this, some philosophers have argued that rule utilitarianism is not really utilitarianism at all (Smart, 1956).

If that is the case, what kind of moral view would it be? That will be the subject of our next chapter, which focuses on *deontological* or rule-based theories of morality.

Going Deeper

Did something in this chapter catch your interest? Want to get a little more in depth with some of the theory, or learn about how it can be applied? Check out these features at the end of the chapter.

[The Trolley Problem](#)

[Higher and Lower Pleasures](#)

[Desired Versus Desirable](#)

Conclusion & Summary

It is important to reiterate at this point that utilitarianism is probably the most familiar and widespread form of moral reasoning that we find today, at least in the West. The idea that our fundamental moral obligation is to bring about the most good in the world is quite attractive. Utilitarianism's attempt to base the notion of "the good" on factors that can be empirically observed and measured independently of personal values, culture, religion, and the like holds great appeal. It fits nicely into a contemporary world increasingly reliant on such independent forms of evaluation to bridge cultural gaps as the world continues to shrink and as traditional sources of meaning, value, and standards of conduct have less sway.

The impartiality and equality at utilitarianism's core reflect the key values of modern Western societies, values that are catching on in the rest of the world. At the same time, there are questions as to whether utilitarianism does justice to the broader range of values than those at its core, like pleasure, happiness, personal desire, impartiality, and equality. There is also the related question of whether it adequately reflects what it means to be human, and thus whether it adequately addresses the fundamental ethical question of how one should live. While utilitarianism may ultimately be able to answer those challenging questions, the questions compel us to consider alternative ways of thinking about ethics. The first of these speaks to that intuition that motivates rule utilitarianism—the idea that certain kinds of actions are simply required or prohibited, regardless of circumstances or outcomes. It is to such deontological approaches to ethics that we now turn.

Key Terms

act utilitarianism The branch of utilitarianism that holds that the morally right action is the one that produces the greatest overall utility in each particular circumstance.

adaptability A feature of a moral theory that allows for variation in moral judgments depending on the specific features of each circumstance.

equal consideration The principle that each particular individual's happiness, suffering, preferences, welfare, or other interests should be accorded equal weight when determining the best outcomes of an action; that is, no one's interests should figure more or less than anyone else's.

hedonism The view that pleasure is the most basic positive value, and pain is the most basic negative value.

hedonistic utilitarianism The form of utilitarianism that identifies utility as pleasure and the absence of pain or suffering.

impartiality The attitude or disposition that does not give preference to the beliefs, values, or interests of any particular individual or group when making moral judgments or decisions.

instrumental value Also called "extrinsic value," this is the value that something has insofar as it produces occurrences of positive value or prevents occurrences of negative value.

intrinsic value The value that something has in itself, regardless of what it produces or prevents.

preference utilitarianism The form of utilitarianism that identifies utility as the satisfaction of individual preferences.

rule utilitarianism The branch of utilitarianism that holds that the morally right action is the one that would lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest number when followed as a general rule.

utilitarianism A consequentialist ethical theory that holds that morally right actions, laws, or policies are those whose

consequences contain the greatest positive value and least negative value compared to the consequences of available alternatives.

utility A measure of well-being and the ultimate standard of value in utilitarianism. This is often defined as happiness, pleasure, and the absence of suffering, or the satisfaction of preferences.

Additional Resources

Hooker, B. (2015). Rule consequentialism. In E. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism-rule>

International Society for Utilitarian Studies, Philip Schofield (Law/University College of London). <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Bentham-Project/news/issue>

Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2015). Consequentialism. In E. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism>

Utilitarianism Resources (<http://www.utilitarianism.com>). A large collection of resources and texts related to utilitarianism.

Further Reading

Anthologies

Darwall, S. (Ed.). (2003). *Consequentialism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Glover, J. (Ed.). (1990). *Utilitarianism and its critics*. New York: Prentice Hall.

Pettit, P. (Ed.). (1993). *Consequentialism*. Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth.

Scheffler, S., 1982. (Ed.). (1988). *Consequentialism and its critics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A., and Williams, B. (Eds.). (1982). *Utilitarianism and beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Articles

Foot, P. (1985). Utilitarianism and the virtues. *Mind*, 94, 196–209.

Pettit, P. (1997). The consequentialist perspective. In M. Baron, P. Pettit, & M. Slote (Eds.), *Three methods of ethics* (pp. 92–174). Oxford: Blackwell.

Smart, J. J. C. (1973). An outline of a system of utilitarian ethics. In J. J. C. Smart & B. Williams (Eds.), *Utilitarianism: For and against* (pp. 3–74). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1973). A critique of utilitarianism. In J. J. C. Smart & B. Williams (Eds.), *Utilitarianism: For and against* (pp. 77–150). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1981). Persons, character, and morality. In *Moral luck* (pp. 1–19). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Primary Source

Chapter 2: What Utilitarianism Is, from *Utilitarianism* by John Stuart Mill (1863)

A PASSING remark is all that needs be given to the ignorant blunder of supposing that those who stand up for utility as the test of right and wrong, use the term in that restricted and merely colloquial sense in which utility is opposed to pleasure. An apology is due to the philosophical opponents of utilitarianism, for even the momentary appearance of confounding them with any one capable of so absurd a misconception; which is the more extraordinary, inasmuch as the contrary accusation, of referring everything to pleasure, and that too in its grossest form, is another of the common charges against utilitarianism: and, as has been pointedly remarked by an able writer, the same sort of persons, and often the very same persons, denounce the theory “as impracticably dry when the word utility precedes the word pleasure, and as too practicably voluptuous when the word pleasure precedes the word utility.” Those who know anything about the matter are aware that every writer, from Epicurus to Bentham, who maintained the theory of utility, meant by it, not something to be contradistinguished from pleasure, but pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain; and instead of opposing the useful to the agreeable or the ornamental, have always declared that the useful means these, among other things. Yet the common herd, including the herd of writers, not only in newspapers and periodicals, but in books of weight and pretension, are perpetually falling into this shallow mistake. Having caught up the word utilitarian, while knowing nothing whatever about it but its sound, they habitually express by it the rejection, or the neglect, of pleasure in some of its forms; of beauty, of ornament, or of amusement. Nor is the term thus ignorantly misapplied solely in disparagement, but occasionally in compliment; as though it implied superiority to frivolity and the mere pleasures of the moment. And this perverted use is the only one in which the word is popularly known, and the one from which the new generation are acquiring their sole notion of its meaning. Those who introduced the word, but who had for many years discontinued it as a distinctive appellation, may well feel themselves called upon to resume it, if by doing so they can hope to contribute anything towards rescuing it from this utter degradation.

The Definition of Utilitarianism

*The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded—namely, that *pleasure, 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.

Higher and Lower Pleasures

Now, such a theory of life excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, inveterate dislike. To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure—no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—they designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened; and modern holders of the doctrine are occasionally made the subject of equally polite comparisons by its German, French, and English assailants.

When thus attacked, the Epicureans have always answered, that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light; since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable. If this supposition were true, the charge could not be gainsaid, but would then be no longer an imputation; for if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same to human beings and to swine, the rule of life which is good enough for the one would be good enough for the other. The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading, precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conceptions of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification. I do not, indeed, consider the Epicureans to have been by any means faultless in drawing out their scheme of consequences from the utilitarian principle. To do this in any sufficient manner, many Stoic, as well as Christian elements require to be included. But there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation. It must be admitted, however, that utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, etc., of the former—that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other, and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise 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 quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. *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.* If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity

of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties. Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him. If they ever fancy they would, it is only in cases of unhappiness so extreme, that to escape from it they would exchange their lot for almost any other, however undesirable in their own eyes. A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness; we may attribute it to pride, a name which is given indiscriminately to some of the most and to some of the least estimable feelings of which mankind are capable: we may refer it to the love of liberty and personal independence, an appeal to which was with the Stoics one of the most effective means for the inculcation of it; to the love of power, or to the love of excitement, both of which do really enter into and contribute to it: but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong, that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them.

Whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness—that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier than the inferior—confounds the two very different ideas, of happiness, and content. It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low, has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied; and a highly endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable; and they will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify. *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, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.

It may be objected, that many who are capable of the higher pleasures, occasionally, under the influence of temptation, postpone them to the lower. But this is quite compatible with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher. Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures, than when it is between bodily and

mental. They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good.

It may be further objected, that many who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they advance in years sink into indolence and selfishness. But I do not believe that those who undergo this very common change, voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe that before they devote themselves exclusively to the one, they have already become incapable of the other. Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying. It may be questioned whether any one who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower; though many, in all ages, have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to combine both.

From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final. And there needs be the less hesitation to accept this judgment respecting the quality of pleasures, since there is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of quantity. What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the intensest of two pleasurable sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both? Neither pains nor pleasures are homogeneous, and pain is always heterogeneous with pleasure. What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular pain, except the feelings and judgment of the experienced? When, therefore, those feelings and judgment declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable in kind, apart from the question of intensity, to those of which the animal nature, disjoined from the higher faculties, is susceptible, they are entitled on this subject to the same regard.

The Greatest Happiness Principle

I have dwelt on this point, as being a necessary part of a perfectly just conception of Utility or Happiness, considered as the directive rule of human conduct. But it is by no means an indispensable condition to the acceptance of the *utilitarian standard*; for *that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether*; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it. Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others,

and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit. But the bare enunciation of such an absurdity as this last, renders refutation superfluous.

Summary of the Utilitarian View

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, as above explained, the ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison. This, being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined,

the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such as has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation.

Objection and Replies

Objection 1: Happiness Is Unattainable

Against this doctrine, however, arises another class of objectors, who say that happiness, in any form, cannot be the rational purpose of human life and action; because, in the first place, it is unattainable: and they contemptuously ask, what right hast thou to be happy? a question which Mr. Carlyle clenches by the addition, What right, a short time ago, hadst thou even to be? Next, they say, that men can do without happiness; that all noble human beings have felt this, and could not have become noble but by learning the lesson of Entsaegen, or renunciation; which lesson, thoroughly learnt and submitted to, they affirm to be the beginning and necessary condition of all virtue.

The first of these objections would go to the root of the matter were it well founded; for if no happiness is to be had at all by human beings, the attainment of it cannot be the end of morality, or of any rational conduct. Though, even in that case, something might still be said for the utilitarian theory; since utility includes not solely the pursuit of happiness, but the prevention or mitigation of unhappiness; and if the former aim be chimerical, there will be all the greater scope and more imperative need for the latter, so long at least as mankind think fit to live, and do not take refuge in the simultaneous act of suicide recommended under certain conditions by Novalis. When, however, it is thus positively asserted to be impossible that human life should be happy, the assertion, if not something like a verbal quibble, is at least an exaggeration. If by happiness be meant a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement, it is evident enough that this is impossible. A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments, or in some cases, and with some intermissions, hours or days, and is the occasional brilliant flash

of enjoyment, not its permanent and steady flame. Of this the philosophers who have taught that happiness is the end of life were as fully aware as those who taunt them. 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 of the whole, 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 of happiness. And such an existence is even now the lot of many, during some considerable portion of their lives. The present wretched education, and wretched social arrangements, are the only real hindrance to its being attainable by almost all.

The objectors perhaps may doubt whether human beings, if taught to consider happiness as the end of life, would be satisfied with such a moderate share of it. But great numbers of mankind have been satisfied with much less. The main constituents of a satisfied life appear to be two, either of which by itself is often found sufficient for the purpose: tranquillity, and excitement. With much tranquillity, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure: with much excitement, many can reconcile themselves to a considerable quantity of pain. There is assuredly no inherent impossibility in enabling even the mass of mankind to unite both; since the two are so far from being incompatible that they are in natural alliance, the prolongation of either being a preparation for, and exciting a wish for, the other. It is only those in whom indolence amounts to a vice, that do not desire excitement after an interval of repose: it is only those in whom the need of excitement is a disease, that feel the tranquillity which follows excitement dull and insipid, instead of pleasurable in direct proportion to the excitement which preceded it. When people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is, caring for nobody but themselves. To those who have neither public nor private affections, the excitements of life are much curtailed, and in any case dwindle in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be terminated by death: while those who leave after them objects of personal affection, and especially those who have also cultivated a fellow-feeling with the collective interests of mankind, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigour of youth and health. Next to selfishness, the principal cause which makes life unsatisfactory is want of mental cultivation. A cultivated mind—I do not mean that of a philosopher; but any mind to which the fountains of knowledge have been opened, and which has been taught, in any tolerable degree, to exercise its faculties—finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it; in the objects of nature, the achievements of art, the imaginations of poetry, the incidents of history, the ways of mankind, past and present, and their prospects in the future. It is possible, indeed, to become indifferent to all this, and that too without having exhausted a thousandth part of it; but only when one has had from the beginning no moral or human interest in these things, and has sought in them only the gratification of curiosity.

Now there is absolutely no reason in the nature of things why an amount of mental culture sufficient to give an intelligent interest in these objects of contemplation, should not be the inheritance of every one born in a civilised country. As little is there an inherent necessity that any human being should be a selfish egotist, devoid of every feeling or care but those which centre in his own miserable individuality. Something far superior to this is sufficiently

common even now, to give ample earnest of what the human species may be made. Genuine private affections and a sincere interest in the public good, are possible, though in unequal degrees, to every rightly brought up human being. In a world in which there is so much to interest, so much to enjoy, and so much also to correct and improve, every one who has this moderate amount of moral and intellectual requisites is capable of an existence which may be called enviable; and unless such a person, through bad laws, or subjection to the will of others, is denied the liberty to use the sources of happiness within his reach, he will not fail to find this enviable existence, if he escape the positive evils of life, the great sources of physical and mental suffering—such as indigence, disease, and the unkindness, worthlessness, or premature loss of objects of affection. The main stress of the problem lies, therefore, in the contest with these calamities, from which it is a rare good fortune entirely to escape; which, as things now are, cannot be obviated, and often cannot be in any material degree mitigated. Yet no one whose opinion deserves a moment's consideration can doubt that most of the great positive evils of the world are in themselves removable, and will, if human affairs continue to improve, be in the end reduced within narrow limits. Poverty, in any sense implying suffering, may be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society, combined with the good sense and providence of individuals. Even that most intractable of enemies, disease, may be indefinitely reduced in dimensions by good physical and moral education, and proper control of noxious influences; while the progress of science holds out a promise for the future of still more direct conquests over this detestable foe. And every advance in that direction relieves us from some, not only of the chances which cut short our own lives, but, what concerns us still more, which deprive us of those in whom our happiness is wrapt up. As for vicissitudes of fortune, and other disappointments connected with worldly circumstances, these are principally the effect either of gross imprudence, of ill-regulated desires, or of bad or imperfect social institutions.

All the grand sources, in short, of human suffering are in a great degree, many of them almost entirely, conquerable by human care and effort; and though their removal is grievously slow—though a long succession of generations will perish in the breach before the conquest is completed, and this world becomes all that, if will and knowledge were not wanting, it might easily be made—yet every mind sufficiently intelligent and generous to bear a part, however small and unobtrusive, in the endeavour, will draw a noble enjoyment from the contest itself, which he would not for any bribe in the form of selfish indulgence consent to be without.

Objection 2: People Can Do Without Happiness

And this leads to the true estimation of what is said by the objectors concerning the possibility, and the obligation, of learning to do without happiness. Unquestionably it is possible to do without happiness; it is done involuntarily by nineteen-twentieths of mankind, even in those parts of our present world which are least deep in barbarism; and it often has to be done voluntarily by the hero or the martyr, for the sake of something which he prizes more than his individual happiness. But this something, what is it, unless the happiness of others or some of the requisites of happiness? It is noble to be capable of resigning entirely one's own portion of happiness, or chances of it: but, after all, this *self-sacrifice* must be for some end; it is not its own end; and if we are told that its end is not happiness, but virtue, which is better than happiness, I ask, would the sacrifice be made if the hero or martyr did not believe that it

would earn for others immunity from similar sacrifices? Would it be made if he thought that his renunciation of happiness for himself would produce no fruit for any of his fellow creatures, but to make their lot like his, and place them also in the condition of persons who have renounced happiness? All honour to those who can abnegate for themselves the personal enjoyment of life, when by such renunciation they contribute worthily to increase the amount of happiness in the world; but he who does it, or professes to do it, for any other purpose, is no more deserving of admiration than the ascetic mounted on his pillar. He may be an inspiring proof of what men *can* do, but assuredly not an example of what they *should*.

Though it is only in a very imperfect state of the world's arrangements that any one can best serve the happiness of others by the absolute sacrifice of his own, yet so long as the world is in that imperfect state, I fully acknowledge that the readiness to make such a sacrifice is the highest virtue which can be found in man. I will add, that in this condition the world, paradoxical as the assertion may be, the conscious ability to do without happiness gives the best prospect of realising, such happiness as is attainable. For nothing except that consciousness can raise a person above the chances of life, by making him feel that, let fate and fortune do their worst, they have not power to subdue him: which, once felt, frees him from excess of anxiety concerning the evils of life, and enables him, like many a Stoic in the worst times of the Roman Empire, to cultivate in tranquillity the sources of satisfaction accessible to him, without concerning himself about the uncertainty of their duration, any more than about their inevitable end.

Meanwhile, let utilitarians never cease to claim the morality of self devotion as a possession which belongs by as good a right to them, as either to the Stoic or to the Transcendentalist. The utilitarian morality does recognise in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it considers as wasted. The only self-renunciation which it applauds, is devotion to the happiness, or to some of the means of happiness, of others; either of mankind collectively, or of individuals within the limits imposed by the collective interests of mankind.

I must again repeat, what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that *the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.* In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbour as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. As the means of making the nearest approach to this ideal, utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness, or (as speaking practically it may be called) the interest, of every individual, as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and secondly, that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole; especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes; so that not only he may be unable to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with

conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being's sentient existence. If the, impugnors of the utilitarian morality represented it to their own minds in this its, true character, I know not what recommendation possessed by any other morality they could possibly affirm to be wanting to it; what more beautiful or more exalted developments of human nature any other ethical system can be supposed to foster, or what springs of action, not accessible to the utilitarian, such systems rely on for giving effect to their mandates.

Objection 3: The Standard Is Too High

The objectors to utilitarianism cannot always be charged with representing it in a discreditable light. On the contrary, those among them who entertain anything like a just idea of its disinterested character, sometimes find fault with its standard as being too high for humanity. They say it is exacting too much to require that people shall always act from the inducement of promoting the general interests of society. But this is to mistake the very meaning of a standard of morals, and confound the rule of action with the motive of it. It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties, or by what test we may know them; but no system of ethics requires that the sole motive of all we do shall be a feeling of duty; on the contrary, ninety-nine hundredths of all our actions are done from other motives, and rightly so done, if the rule of duty does not condemn them. It is the more unjust to utilitarianism that this particular misapprehension should be made a ground of objection to it, inasmuch as utilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost all others in affirming that the *motive has nothing to do with the morality of the 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; he who betrays the friend that trusts him, is guilty of a crime, even if his object be to serve another friend to whom he is under greater obligations.

But to speak only of actions done from the motive of duty, and in direct obedience to principle: it is a misapprehension of the utilitarian mode of thought, to conceive it as implying that people should fix their minds upon so wide a generality as the world, or society at large. The great majority of good actions are intended not for the benefit of the world, but for that of individuals, of which the good of the world is made up; and the thoughts of the most virtuous man need not on these occasions travel beyond the particular persons concerned, except so far as is necessary to assure himself that in benefiting them he is not violating the rights, that is, the legitimate and authorised expectations, of any one else. The multiplication of happiness is, according to the utilitarian ethics, the object of virtue: the occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale, in other words to be a public benefactor, are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case, private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to. Those alone the influence of whose actions extends to society in general, need concern themselves habitually about large an object. In the case of abstinences indeed—of things which people forbear to do from moral considerations, though the consequences in the particular case might be beneficial—it *would be unworthy of an intelligent agent not to be consciously aware that the action is of a class which, if practised generally, would be generally injurious, and that this is the ground of the obligation to abstain*

from it. The amount of regard for the public interest implied in this recognition, is no greater than is demanded by every system of morals, for they all enjoin to abstain from whatever is manifestly pernicious to society.

Objection 4: Undermines the Importance of Good Character

The same considerations dispose of another reproach against the doctrine of utility, founded on a still grosser misconception of the purpose of a standard of morality, and of the very meaning of the words right and wrong. It is often affirmed that utilitarianism renders men cold and unsympathising; that it chills their moral feelings towards individuals; that it makes them regard only the dry and hard consideration of the consequences of actions, not taking into their moral estimate the qualities from which those actions emanate. If the assertion means that they do not allow their judgment respecting the rightness or wrongness of an action to be influenced by their opinion of the qualities of the person who does it, this 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 a bad man, still less because done by an amiable, a brave, or a benevolent man, or the contrary. These considerations are relevant, not to the estimation of actions, but of persons; and there is nothing in the utilitarian theory inconsistent with the fact that there are other things which interest us in persons besides the rightness and wrongness of their actions. The Stoics, indeed, with the paradoxical misuse of language which was part of their system, and by which they strove to raise themselves above all concern about anything but virtue, were fond of saying that he who has that has everything; that he, and only he, is rich, is beautiful, is a king. But no claim of this description is made for the virtuous man by the utilitarian doctrine. Utilitarians are quite aware that there are other desirable possessions and qualities besides virtue, and are perfectly willing to allow to all of them their full worth. They are also aware that a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character, and that actions which are blamable, often proceed from qualities entitled to praise. When this is apparent in any particular case, it modifies their estimation, not certainly of the act, but of the agent. I grant that they are, notwithstanding, of opinion, that in the long run the best proof of a good character is good actions; and resolutely refuse to consider any mental disposition as good, of which the predominant tendency is to produce bad conduct. This makes them unpopular with many people; but it is an unpopularity which they must share with every one who regards the distinction between right and wrong in a serious light; and the reproach is not one which a conscientious utilitarian need be anxious to repel.

If no more be meant by the objection than that many utilitarians look on the morality of actions, as measured by the utilitarian standard, with too exclusive a regard, and do not lay sufficient stress upon the other beauties of character which go towards making a human being lovable or admirable, this may be admitted. Utilitarians who have cultivated their moral feelings, but not their sympathies nor their artistic perceptions, do fall into this mistake; and so do all other moralists under the same conditions. What can be said in excuse for other moralists is equally available for them, namely, that, if there is to be any error, it is better that it should be on that side. As a matter of fact, we may affirm that among utilitarians as among adherents of other systems, there is every imaginable degree of rigidity and of laxity in the application of their standard: some are even puritanically rigorous, while others are as indulgent as can

possibly be desired by sinner or by sentimentalist. But on the whole, a doctrine which brings prominently forward the interest that mankind have in the repression and prevention of conduct which violates the moral law, is likely to be inferior to no other in turning the sanctions of opinion against such violations. It is true, the question, What does violate the moral law? is one on which those who recognise different standards of morality are likely now and then to differ. But difference of opinion on moral questions was not first introduced into the world by utilitarianism, while that doctrine does supply, if not always an easy, at all events a tangible and intelligible mode of deciding such differences.

It may not be superfluous to notice a few more of the common misapprehensions of utilitarian ethics, even those which are so obvious and gross that it might appear impossible for any person of candour and intelligence to fall into them; since persons, even of considerable mental endowments, often give themselves so little trouble to understand the bearings of any opinion against which they entertain a prejudice, and men are in general so little conscious of this voluntary ignorance as a defect, that the vulgarest misunderstandings of ethical doctrines are continually met with in the deliberate writings of persons of the greatest pretensions both to high principle and to philosophy.

Objection 5: Utilitarianism Is Godless

We not uncommonly hear the doctrine of utility inveighed against as a godless doctrine. If it be necessary to say anything at all against so mere an assumption, we may say that the question 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, utility is not only not a godless doctrine, but more profoundly religious than any other. If it be meant that utilitarianism does not recognise the revealed will of God as the supreme law of morals, I answer, that a 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 fulfil the requirements of utility in a supreme degree. But others besides utilitarians have been of opinion that the Christian revelation was intended, and is fitted, to inform the hearts and minds of mankind with a spirit which should enable them to find for themselves what is right, and incline them to do it when found, rather than to tell them, except in a very general way, what it is; and that we need a doctrine of ethics, carefully followed out, to interpret to us the will God. Whether this opinion is correct or not, it is superfluous here to discuss; since whatever aid religion, either natural or revealed, can afford to ethical investigation, is as open to the utilitarian moralist as to any other. He can use it as the testimony of God to the usefulness or hurtfulness of any given course of action, by as good a right as others can use it for the indication of a transcendental law, having no connection with usefulness or with happiness.

Objection 6: It's Mere Expediency

Again, Utility is often summarily stigmatised as an immoral doctrine by giving it the name of Expediency, and taking advantage of the popular use of that term to contrast it with Principle. But the Expedient, in the sense in which it is opposed to the Right, generally means that which is expedient for the particular interest of the agent himself; as when a minister sacrifices the

interests of his country to keep himself in place. When it means anything better than this, it means that which is expedient for some immediate object, some temporary purpose, but which violates a rule whose observance is expedient in a much higher degree. The Expedient, in this sense, instead of being the same thing with the useful, is a branch of the hurtful. Thus, it would often be expedient, for the purpose of getting over some momentary embarrassment, or attaining some object immediately useful to ourselves or others, to tell a lie. But inasmuch as the cultivation in ourselves of a sensitive feeling on the subject of veracity, is one of the most useful, and the enfeeblement of that feeling one of the most hurtful, things to which our conduct can be instrumental; and inasmuch as any, even unintentional, deviation from truth, does that much towards weakening the trustworthiness of human assertion, which is not only the principal support of all present social well-being, but the insufficiency of which does more than any one thing that can be named to keep back civilisation, virtue, everything on which human happiness on the largest scale depends; we feel that the violation, for a present advantage, of a rule of such transcendent expediency, is not expedient, and that he who, for the sake of a convenience to himself or to some other individual, does what depends on him to deprive mankind of the good, and inflict upon them the evil, involved in the greater or less reliance which they can place in each other's word, acts the part of one of their worst enemies. Yet that even this rule, sacred as it is, admits of possible exceptions, is acknowledged by all moralists; the chief of which is when the withholding of some fact (as of information from a malefactor, or of bad news from a person dangerously ill) would save an individual (especially an individual other than oneself) from great and unmerited evil, and when the withholding can only be effected by denial. But in order that the exception may not extend itself beyond the need, and may have the least possible effect in weakening reliance on veracity, it ought to be recognised, and, if possible, its limits defined; and if the principle of utility is good for anything, it must be good for weighing these conflicting utilities against one another, and marking out the region within which one or the other preponderates.

Objection 7: Cannot Calculate Consequences

Again, defenders of utility often find themselves called upon to reply to such objections as this—that there is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness. 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 anything 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 actions; on which experience all the prudence, as well as all the morality of life, are dependent. People talk as if the commencement of this course of experience had hitherto been put off, and as if, at the moment when some man feels tempted to meddle with the property or life of another, he had to begin considering for the first time whether murder and theft are injurious to human happiness. Even then I do not think that he would find the question very puzzling; but, at all events, the matter is now done to his hand.

It is truly a whimsical supposition that, if mankind were agreed in considering utility to be the test of morality, they would remain without any agreement as to what is useful, and would take no measures for having their notions on the subject taught to the young, and enforced

by law and opinion. There is no difficulty in proving any ethical standard whatever to work ill, if we suppose universal idiocy to be conjoined with it; but on any hypothesis short of that, mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness; and the beliefs which have thus come down are the rules of morality for the multitude, and for the philosopher until he has succeeded in finding better. That philosophers might easily do this, even now, on many subjects; that the received code of ethics is by no means of divine right; and that mankind have still much to learn as to the effects of actions on the general happiness, I admit, or rather, earnestly maintain. The corollaries from the principle of utility, like the precepts of every practical art, admit of indefinite improvement, and, in a progressive state of the human mind, their improvement is perpetually going on.

But to consider the rules of morality as improvable, is one thing; to pass over the intermediate generalisations entirely, and endeavour to test each individual action directly by the first principle, is another. It is a strange notion that the acknowledgment of a first principle is inconsistent with the admission of secondary ones. To inform a traveller respecting the place of his ultimate destination, is not to forbid the use of landmarks and direction-posts on the way. The proposition that happiness is the end and aim of morality, does not mean that no road ought to be laid down to that goal, or that persons going thither should not be advised to take one direction rather than another. Men really ought to leave off talking a kind of nonsense on this subject, which they would neither talk nor listen to on other matters of practical concernment. Nobody argues that the art of navigation is not founded on astronomy, because sailors cannot wait to calculate the Nautical Almanack. Being rational creatures, they go to sea with it ready calculated; and all rational creatures go out upon the sea of life with their minds made up on the common questions of right and wrong, as well as on many of the far more difficult questions of wise and foolish. And this, as long as foresight is a human quality, it is to be presumed they will continue to do. Whatever we adopt as the fundamental principle of morality, we require subordinate principles to apply it by; the impossibility of doing without them, being common to all systems, can afford no argument against any one in particular; but gravely to argue as if no such secondary principles could be had, and as if mankind had remained till now, and always must remain, without drawing any general conclusions from the experience of human life, is as high a pitch, I think, as absurdity has ever reached in philosophical controversy.

Objection 8: Too Easily Allows for Exceptions

The remainder of the stock arguments against utilitarianism mostly consist in laying to its charge the common infirmities of human nature, and the general difficulties which embarrass conscientious persons in shaping their course through life. We are told that a utilitarian will be apt to make his own particular case an exception to moral rules, and, when under temptation, will see a utility in the breach of a rule, greater than he will see in its observance. But is utility 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 recognise 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 is no ethical creed which does not temper the rigidity of its laws, by giving a certain latitude, under the moral responsibility of the agent, for accommodation to peculiarities of circumstances; and under every creed, at the opening thus made, self-deception and dishonest casuistry get in. There exists no moral system under which there do not arise unequivocal cases of conflicting obligation. These are the real difficulties, the knotty points both in the theory of ethics, and in the conscientious guidance of personal conduct. They are overcome practically, with greater or with less success, according to the intellect and virtue of the individual; but it can hardly be pretended that any one will be the less qualified for dealing with them, from possessing an ultimate standard to which conflicting rights and duties can be referred. If utility is the ultimate source of moral obligations, utility may be invoked to decide between them when their demands are incompatible. Though the application of the standard may be difficult, it is better than none at all: while in other systems, the moral laws all claiming independent authority, there is no common umpire entitled to interfere between them; their claims to precedence one over another rest on little better than sophistry, and unless determined, as they generally are, by the unacknowledged influence of considerations of utility, afford a free scope for the action of personal desires and partialities. We must remember that only in these cases of conflict between secondary principles is it requisite that first principles should be appealed to. There is no case of moral obligation in which some secondary principle is not involved; and if only one, there can seldom be any real doubt which one it is, in the mind of any person by whom the principle itself is recognised.

Going Deeper

The Trolley Problem

What if you could save five lives in a way that results in the death of a single person? If the overall consequences were the same, would it matter if you were intentionally harming that person or not? This problem is raised by the philosopher Philippa Foot (2002c) in her famous “trolley problem.”

Consider the following scenario:

Imagine that you are standing next to a railroad track, and a runaway train is careening down the track. In the path of the train are five workers (let’s suppose they cannot escape the path of the train; perhaps they are in the middle of a long, narrow bridge high above a ravine). You know that if the train continues on its path, it will certainly kill those five workers.

However, you see that there is a sidetrack, and on the sidetrack is a single worker. Let’s also suppose that you know that if the train goes onto the sidetrack, that single worker would be killed.

As it happens, you are standing next to a lever that can send the train onto the sidetrack. Therefore, you are faced with a decision: to pull the lever and send the train to the sidetrack, killing the one worker but sparing the five, or do nothing and allow the train to continue on its course, killing the five workers.

What would a utilitarian say is the right action here? Do you agree with that?

Now consider this slight variation:

Instead of standing next to a lever that can switch the train to another track, you are standing on a bridge overlooking the track, and next to you is a very large man (think someone the size of an NFL lineman). He’s leaning precariously over the railing such that barely a push would send him over the railing and onto the tracks. Let’s suppose that he’s large enough to stop the train, thus sparing the five workers, but his own life will be lost. Let’s also suppose that you aren’t large enough to stop the train, so it would do no good to throw yourself over.

Should you push the large man over the bridge?

Again, consider:

What would a utilitarian say is the right action here? Do you agree with that?

Did you provide a different answer to the second scenario than you did to the first for either question? If so, what accounts for that difference? If not, why do you think many people *would* want to give different answers to the two?

Higher and Lower Pleasures

We have been examining how Bentham and Mill arrived at the basic formulation of the utilitarian moral theory. Later, we will consider some objections to this account, but there was one important criticism that Mill addressed immediately after defining the utilitarian standard of morality: that utilitarianism is a “doctrine worthy of swine.” Read the section “[Higher and Lower Pleasures](#)” and return here.

Recall that Bentham’s hedonistic view maintained that pleasure is the only component of happiness and pain is the only component of unhappiness, and on this Mill concurred. Bentham also insisted that there was no difference between different *kinds* of pleasure or pain, only differences of amount. “Quantity of pleasure being equal,” Bentham said, “push-pin is as good as poetry” (as cited in Mill, 1974, p. 123).

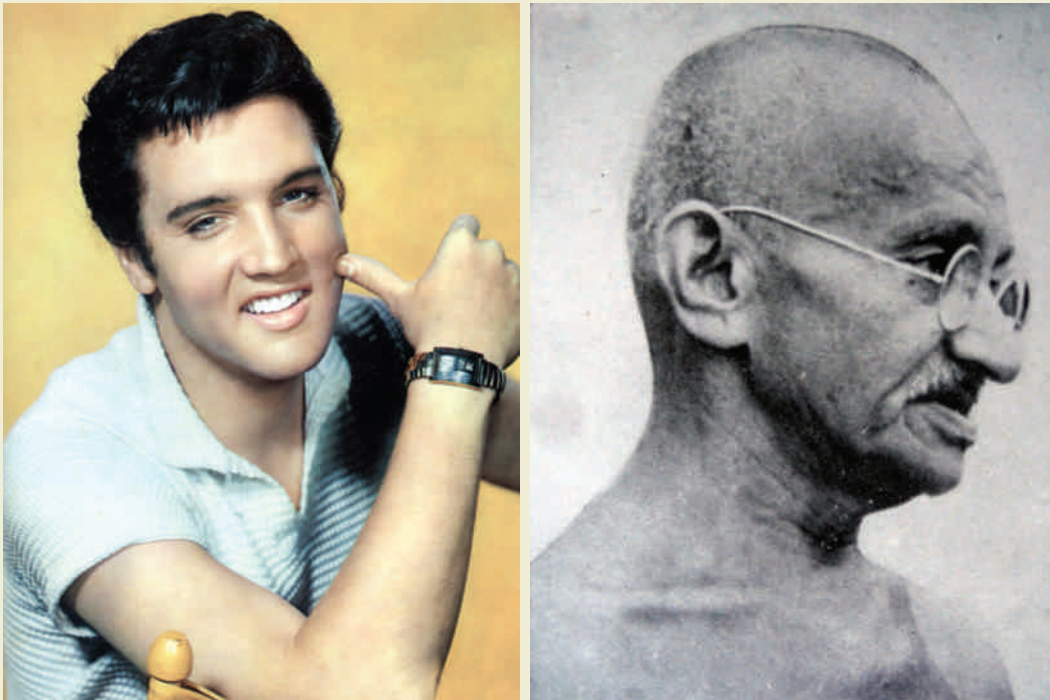
Push-pin was a child’s game, providing simple amusement but certainly not invoking deeper and more sophisticated human intellectual and emotional capacities that are invoked by reading good poetry. We can think of this as the difference between the pleasure of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and the pleasure of listening to Beethoven or the Beatles. While a child might gain a lot of pleasure from the first and have no interest in the second, surely by the time we are adults we appreciate that there is something *better* about Beethoven or the Beatles, such that it’s a greater *kind* of pleasure than that of “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

However, Bentham insisted that ultimately there is no real difference of this sort: While there might be different *amounts* of pleasure gained from a child’s amusement versus a more sophisticated kind of amusement, there is no difference in the pleasure itself. If an adult gains pleasure from listening to “Mary Had a Little Lamb” or playing push-pin, there’s no reason to suppose this is any different than the same amount of pleasure gained from listening to Beethoven or the Beatles or reading poetry. Pleasure is pleasure, and the only question left to ask is, how much?

This claim led critics to complain that utilitarianism is a doctrine worthy of swine. What did they mean? First, think of what might be swine-like (or animal-like) behavior—that is, the things that people do that are similar to animals. For example, we might see people gorging themselves on food and drink and think of a pig greedily devouring everything in front of it, or we might think of people who seem to live for sexual gratification and recall dogs in the middle of a park sniffing each other and then . . . well, you can fill in the details. Such behavior seems to undermine the fact that we humans are capable of much more than pigs and dogs.

Similarly, think of what we mean when we say of another person, “She was capable of so much, but she wasted her talent on her wild ways.” In other words, some people have the potential to do remarkable things, but instead of realizing that potential, they squander it by indulging in activities that people without such capacities could do. We have this sense that if someone has a certain *potential* for something great, it’s a shame when that person doesn’t realize that potential. Just as we could say this about someone who has a very specific talent (comparing her with people who don’t have that talent), we could also say this about the human race itself (comparing it with animals that don’t have our human capacities).

Animals, by nature, pursue pleasure and avoid pain, and so do humans; but we pursue much more than that. So when critics characterized utilitarianism as a doctrine worthy of swine, they meant that by making pleasure and the avoidance of pain the ultimate end of our actions, utilitarianism tries to reduce everything worth pursuing to the things that make us *no different* than other animals. Indeed, those base, swine-like pleasures are easier to come by, and we can enjoy more of them if we disregard the more complex and difficult pursuits that we praise as the pinnacles of human achievement. If our ultimate end was simply to maximize pleasure, utilitarianism would seem to encourage us to indulge in basic and more carnal forms of pleasure seeking at the expense of ones we might normally consider more noble, worthy, and indeed, more human.



GAB Archive/Contributor/Getty Images; World History Archive/SuperStock

Consider these two people. Whose life contained more raw pleasure? And whose life do we consider more admirable?

For Mill, this was a serious objection, not just because of the intellectual challenges it raised but also on a personal level. After all, it was his experience of the sublime qualities of poetry (a distinctively *human* achievement that no swine could ever produce or appreciate) that brought him out of a state of despair he experienced in his early adult years. (See [John Stuart Mill](#) for more information.)

Mill responded to this challenge by maintaining that we should be concerned not just with the *quantity* of pleasure produced by our actions but the *quality*. In other words, he disagreed with Bentham's claim that all pleasures are essentially the same and wanted to vindicate the sense that, for adults at least, reading poetry or listening to Beethoven and the Beatles provided a higher *kind* of pleasure than playing push-pin or listening to "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

How does he make this distinction? By looking at what people actually desire: “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” (Mill, 1861/2001, p. 8).

For example, if you go to a liquor store, you will find dozens of kinds of beer, ranging from cheap, frat-party brands to expensive ones brewed in Belgian abbeys, and everything in between. Speaking strictly of the taste of the beer (not the effects of the alcohol), for many people the pleasure of tasting a beautifully crafted Belgian beer is incomparable to the pleasure of tasting a watery light beer, and tasting *more* of those cheaper ones won’t somehow make them equal.

Or to take another example, think of the difference between the pleasures of a casual sexual relationship and a sexual relationship that involves deep connection and love. Those who have experienced the physical and emotional pleasures associated with a deep, long-lasting relationship often say that they would never trade it for the more frequent but shallower pleasures of many casual relationships. In Mill’s view, this would indicate that the sexual pleasures associated with deeper relationships are of a higher quality than those associated with shallower relationships, and this is a difference in *kind* (higher and lower), not just *amount* (more or less). As Mill (1861/2001) puts it in a memorable line, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (p. 10).

Mill argues that by drawing this distinction between higher and lower pleasures, he can show that utilitarianism does not reduce humans to the level of animals when it regards pleasure and the avoidance of pain as the standard of action. While it’s true, in a sense, that both humans and animals pursue pleasure and avoid pain, *human* pleasure, especially the kind that invokes our distinctly human capacities like intellect and depth of emotion, is (or can be) of such a different kind compared to animal pleasure that there is no comparison when considering what should factor into the utilitarian calculation of the best consequences and thus of moral action.

The success of Mill’s argument depends, of course, on whether this distinction allows us to continue to use pleasure and pain as objective standards of measurement in the way we described previously. Bentham’s view that all pleasures are equal allowed him to reduce everything of value to a single, common currency, providing for a neat and tidy comparison of the values of various possible outcomes. By adding in the distinction between higher and lower pleasures, has Mill complicated the utilitarian calculus to the point that we can no longer make such objective evaluations?

Desired Versus Desirable

Is the fact that people desire something enough to show that it is desirable, as Mill claimed about happiness? Or to put it differently, do some things have value in themselves independent of whether people happen to value them? This is an ancient question, and one of the

earliest and most famous versions was raised by the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato in a dialogue called the *Euthyphro*.

In this dialogue, Socrates engages in debate with a man named Euthyphro, who regarded himself as an authority on religious matters. Socrates challenges him to define what it means to be pious or holy, and Euthyphro answers by defining the pious or holy as that which the gods love. To this Socrates responds by asking, “Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” (Plato, 1997d, 10a). In other words, one might consider certain things like giving to the poor, performing acts of worship and sacrifice, and refraining from acts of dishonesty or violence to be marks of piety and holiness. Why? Euthyphro answers that the gods love these sorts of things. But Socrates asks whether *the mere fact that the gods love them* is what makes them good, or whether the gods love them because *they are good in themselves*.

Why is this important? If the first is the case—if the only reason we call something good (or in Plato’s terms, pious) is because the gods happen to favor it—goodness seems arbitrary. If the gods happened to favor murder, rape, theft, and so on, then *those* should be considered “good.” But for many people this seems false: These kinds of things seem *intrinsically* wrong, and if someone were to claim that this is what the gods favor, we would have reason to either reject this person’s claim or reject the gods. Either way, we would be drawing on a standard of goodness that is independent of what the gods favor, or at least what we think the gods favor, so the mere fact that something is (or is thought to be) loved by the gods is not what makes it holy.

Now, Plato was writing for a culture that believed in many gods, and the stories about those gods portrayed them as having significantly greater powers than humans but also as susceptible to many of the same vices and flaws as humans, such as lust, greed, envy, ill-temperedness, and so on. This contrasts with the God of the major monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), whose adherents believe to be without such flaws. Nevertheless, Plato’s challenge is still relevant: If God has supposedly commanded something, is that enough to make it right? Or do we have independent standards by which to evaluate whether we should believe that God really did command this thing or whether we should be following this God’s commandments at all?

Our topic, however, isn’t theology but ethics. For our purposes, the fact that Plato’s and Socrates’s gods were much more humanlike in their character and temperament brings this discussion of the relationship between piety and the love of the gods much closer to our own question of whether “desired” is the same thing as “desirable.” Again, Socrates questioned whether the mere fact that the gods loved something made it good. Bringing this to the human level, we might ask whether the mere fact that someone desires something makes it desirable, if by *desirable* we mean “worthy of desire” or simply “good.” If we believe that we, like Plato’s gods, are susceptible to all kinds of vices and flaws, then could it be the case that we desire things that are not actually good? If so, how do we determine what is actually good or desirable?