



Lecture 13: Utilitarianism



Pleasure and pain

Hume saw pleasure and pain as two of our most basic feelings. Perhaps the ultimate aim of all our actions is to avoid pain and seek pleasure? In Utilitarianism (= utility, welfare, wellbeing), it is taken for granted that all humans share this aim.

Utilitarians often talk of “preferences”. The ability to feel pleasure and pain give us a *preference* to choose pleasure over pain. From this, our moral rights and obligations can be found. We should not be treated such that we suffer pain, and we should not inflict pain on others. Instead, we should try to act in a way that increases the welfare or happiness of others.

Utilitarianism as a consequentialist theory

We saw that virtue ethics is about our virtues and moral character. In contrast, utilitarianism is a *consequentialist* ethics. This means that an action is judged on its consequences. Specifically, it is judged by whether it inflicts pain or pleasure in others.

In utilitarianism, the consequences thus determine whether an action was morally good or bad. There are two ways to do this:

Act-utilitarianism: an act is morally right if it produces more happiness or welfare than any alternative act. Here, each individual act is judged according to its consequences.

Example: helping someone crossing the street might end up hurting them. If so, it was morally wrong.

Rule-utilitarianism: an act is morally right if it accords with a rule that produces more happiness or welfare than any alternative rule (if everyone followed the rule). A type of act is thus judged by considering the general consequences of a rule. **Example:** helping someone crossing the street generally result in increased welfare, so morally right, even if the outcome is sometimes bad.

The Greatest Happiness principle

How can we judge whether one action is better than another, morally speaking, if they both produce a good outcome? For a utilitarian, this is done by considering which of those two brings about the greatest total of happiness or welfare.

John Stuart Mill formulates the principle as follows:

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 1863, Utilitarianism, ch. 2)

Put simply, the more happiness or welfare an action produces, the better it is, morally speaking. In practice, we can then weigh the costs against the benefits and see whether an action has a greater or smaller total benefit than the alternative action.

Equality for all humans (and animals)

A fundamental principle for utilitarianism is *equality*. The founder of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, argued for equality – irrespectively of gender, race or sexual orientation. Each individual should given equal weight when considering the outcome.

Some utilitarians care mainly about outcomes for humans, and we call this an *anthropocentric* type of utilitarianism. But which lives should count? Should we also consider unborn children (foetus), fertilised eggs (embryos) or future generations?

To Bentham and Peter Singer, however, it is important to recognise that also animals have preferences towards pleasure and freedom from pain:

The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? (Bentham 1780, Introduction to the *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, p. 17)

And:

If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering... of any other being. (Singer 1975, *Animal Liberation*, p. 8)

When humans and animals are all taken into consideration, we call it a *non-anthropocentric* utilitarianism.

Is it morally right to sacrifice few to save many?

The most famous argument against utilitarianism was presented by Philippa Foot. This is called ‘the trolley problem’. A trolley is running down a train track that splits into two a bit further down. In one direction, there are five people tied to the track. In the other direction, only one person is tied down. Foot pointed out that it would be morally right to sacrifice the one person to save the lives of the five people, according to the greatest happiness principle.

There are other and perhaps more common examples where sacrificing a few people could increase the welfare of the majority. Would it be morally right to kill one person to use their organs to save the lives of 6 people? In warfare, one must often make such choices: blow up a bridge to stop the enemy, thus killing those on the bridge, but saving everyone else.

Crucial for utilitarianism, however, is that selfish interests should play no role in a moral decision.

...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... 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. (Mill 1863)

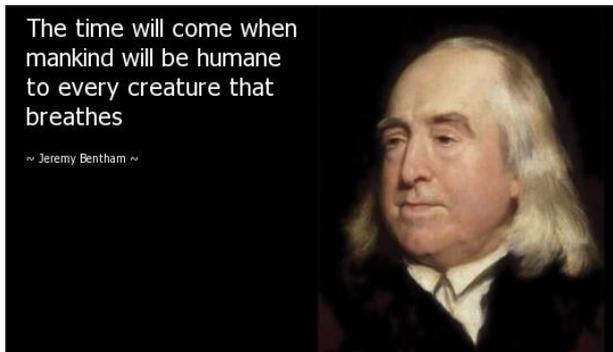
As a rule-utilitarian, one could say that it is generally wrong to sacrifice a few to save many, because this type of act would create a society of fear and suspicion. No one would know who the next sacrifice would be, and it is doubtful that it could produce the greatest total of happiness.

Utilitarianism in practise

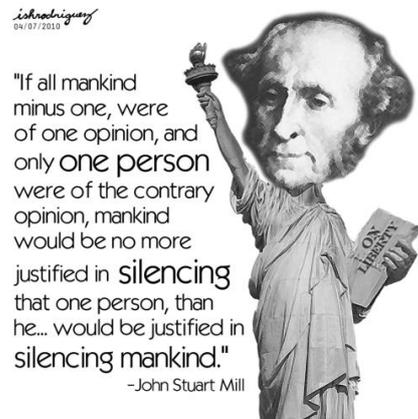
The Life You Can Save is an organization founded by Singer, who started the movement *Effective Altruism*. To lead an ethical life involves using a portion of one’s wealth to counteract extreme poverty. The website also informs you about which organisations are most effective: www.thelifeyoucanlive.org

Discussion questions

- Name some utilitarian philosophers.
- What characterises utilitarianism as a moral theory?
- What does it mean that utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory?
- What is the Greatest Happiness principle?
- What is the difference between act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism? *Which do you prefer and why?*
- What is the difference between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric utilitarian theories? *Which would you support? Why?*
- What is the trolley problem? Do you think this is a serious problem for utilitarian theory in general?*
- How would you compare virtue ethics, duty ethics and utilitarianism?*

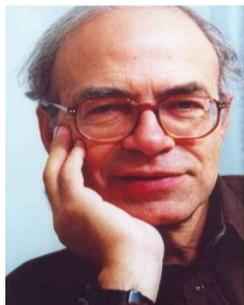


Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) is the founder of utilitarianism.



John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) emphasises that everyone is equal.

Singer: preference utilitarianism



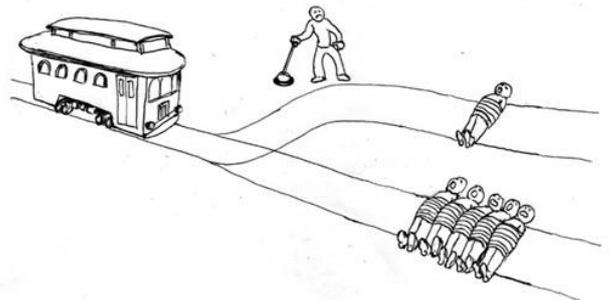
- Singer argues that it is preferences rather than human life that we ought to value.
- Therefore animals fall within our moral obligations since certain animals show preferences e.g. to be with others of same species and to avoid pain.
- It also means that killing a person who wanted to be killed could be seen as a morally right action.

Peter Singer (1946-) is known for his fight for animal liberation. He is also on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/PeterSinger>

The Trolley Problem
by Philippa Foot (1920-2010)



- Described the "Trolley Problem" in her 1967 paper, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect". Should we sacrifice 1 to save 5?
- Virtue ethicist inspired by Aristotelian ethics. The Trolley Problem is a means of discussing Utilitarianism and other ethical positions.
- The trolley problem has inspired an episode of the TV series, The Good Place (see link below).



The Good Place, 2016-2020



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDnO4nDA3kM>



Preference utilitarianism sees animals and humans as equal. **We all share a preference to live and to avoid pain.**

Photo: Flickr