

# Utilitarianism: J. S. Mill, and more recent debates

## Mill

John Stuart Mill: *Utilitarianism* (1863)

Roger Crisp: *Mill - On Utilitarianism* (1997)

Piers Benn: *Ethics* ch.3 (1998)

Anthony Quinton: *Utilitarian Ethics* ch.III 'John Stuart Mill' (1973)

J.L. Mackie: *Ethics* ch.6 (1977)

John Skorupski: *John Stuart Mill* (1989)

J.J. McCloskey: *John Stuart Mill: A Critical Study* (1971)

## Two Other Classical Utilitarians

Jeremy Bentham: *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* chs.1-4 (1789)

Henry Sidgwick: *The Methods of Ethics* Book IV (1874, first ed.)

## Recent Discussions

J. J. C. Smart & Bernard Williams: *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (1963)

Bernard Williams: 'Persons, character and morality' (esp. towards the end) and 'Utilitarianism and moral self-indulgence' both in his *Moral Luck*

Susan Wolf: 'Moral Saints' *Journal of Philosophy*, 79 (1982) 419-39;

reproduced in Peter Singer, *Ethics*

Philippa Foot: 'Utilitarianism and the Virtues' ch.10 in S. Scheffler ed. *Consequentialism and its Critics* (1988), reprinted from *MIND* 94 (1985), 196-209

Samuel Scheffler: 'Agent-centred Restrictions, Rationality, and the Virtues', ch.11 in S. Scheffler ed. *Consequentialism and its Critics* (1988) [relates to the Foot cited above];

reprinted from *MIND* 94 (1985), 409-19

Joseph Raz: *The Morality of Freedom* ch.11 'Consequentialism: an introduction' (1986)

Bernard Williams & Amartya Sen: *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, their Introduction, and

'Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism' by R.M.Hare

Jonathan Glover *Utilitarianism and its Critics* (good collection of extracts - read selectively)

Specifically rule/indirect:

Peter Railton: 'Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality' in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1984, also in S.Scheffler (ed.) *Consequentialism and its Critics*

James Griffin: *Value Judgement* (1996) short section (5a), pp.103-7

Brad Hooker: *Ideal Code, Real World* (2000)

Possible Essay Questions

1. How plausible is the utilitarian conception of the relationship between the principle of utility and the way in which a moral agent ought to act?
2. Is J.S.Mill's conception of the 'highest good' consistent with hedonism?
3. Is happiness the only thing desirable in itself?
4. Does consequentialism give a plausible account of the importance of consequences to the moral evaluation of actions?
5. Can any form of utilitarianism escape fatal criticism?
6. Can utilitarianism accommodate (a) integrity, and (b) friendship?
7. Is a society of non-utilitarians the best form of utilitarian society?
8. Should the well-being of someone bad count for just as much as the well-being of someone good?
9. Must the consequentialist moral agent have an unduly impartial attitude?

10. *Do we naturally aim to maximize pleasure? Should we?*

## **J. S. Mill's Utilitarianism**

### **What is 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' (p.257 in Warnock ed.).

Mill was largely following (but took himself to be improving upon) the utilitarian doctrine of Jeremy Bentham.

The altruism built into utilitarianism takes a strongly egalitarianism or 'impartialist' form. It says that whenever we act, what we must consider is not the happiness of any one in particular (e.g. ourselves, our family or friends) but rather the **total** or **aggregate** or **general happiness**. Utilitarianism provides no rationale for placing one person's happiness above that of another.

The Greatest Happiness Principle (GHP) functions as a unique 'ultimate principle' to settle moral disputes and conflicts of values.

This idea that there is an ultimate principle of morality imposes something that is one of the most fundamental features of utilitarianism: **commensurability of values**. This is the idea that all goods or values can be rendered and indeed quantified in terms of a **single moral currency**: viz. utility/happiness.

But are all values really reducible to happiness? This seems especially doubtful when we consider Mill's (as Bentham's) hedonist conception of happiness in terms of pleasure:

'By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure' (p.357).

Even if we granted the hedonist conception, It is still not clear that pleasures are all commensurable with each other (consider the differences between, say, physical, social, musical, intellectual, visual, gustatory pleasures).

### **Hedonism?**

This term is used very literally to describe the conception of happiness as pleasure, but there remains a question about what sorts of pleasure(s) Mill thinks utilitarianism would really prescribe. Would it in fact promote a hedonistic culture in which people aim to maximize aggregate instant gratification?

Perhaps not; at least Mill argues not, defending his view by way of a distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures.

He draws a distinction between '**higher**' pleasures (typically intellectual, enduring, requiring some effort and cultivation) and '**lower**' pleasures (typically physical, fleeting, requiring no special effort or cultivation).

But it is unclear Mill can really make this distinction consistently with his utilitarianism, which relies on there being a **single** moral currency of utility/pleasure. Perhaps the only way Mill could make his distinction would be in terms of higher pleasures being somehow more pleasurable than lower ones. ('More pleasurable' perhaps because more intensely pleasurable; or because more pleasurable over the long term, either in virtue of their being simply more durable, or in virtue of their being productive of further pleasures). Yet he makes (perhaps careless?) assertions to the contrary, e.g. on p.262 he says that higher pleasures are 'preferable [to lower ones] *in kind* apart from the question of intensity'.

## The calculation

Presumably an act has an indefinite number of consequences, so we should ask (a) the practical question, How many consequences must the agent consider in deliberating what to do?; and (b) the conceptual question, Which consequences contribute to determining the moral status (the rightness or wrongness) of the action?

The utilitarian may simply say that individual agents must decide how to act on the basis of the knowledge they have. This may be all right as an answer to the practical question; but it leaves open the conceptual question of the **moral relevance** of causally distant or otherwise unforeseeable consequences (e.g. those affecting future generations).

## Mill's 'proof' (ch.IV *Utilitarianism*)

We may think of the proof as a project in trying to derive a normative ethics from observations or alleged empirical facts about human psychology, esp. motivation for action.

Mill makes quite clear he thinks 'that questions of ultimate ends do not admit of proof, in the ordinary acceptance of the term' but he proceeds anyway to see how far he can get.

His 'proof' has **three stages**:

1 - 'The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is **desirable**, is that **people do actually desire it**' (p.288).

But this supposed analogy between visibility and desirability trades on an equivocation between two meanings of 'desirable': 'is desired' (descriptive) and 'is worthy of being desired' (normative/evaluative). The inference based on the analogy is therefore false, and is sometimes called the 'fallacy of equivocation'.

2 - 'that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons' (p.289).

This is sometimes called the 'fallacy of composition'. What Mill needs to convince us of in this second stage of his 'proof' is the utilitarian claim that every individual ought to act so as to maximize the general or **aggregate** happiness. He tries to derive this from the empirical claim that each person values her/his own happiness, but he surely cannot derive any such thing. What it amounts to is a move from an egoistic psychology (pursuing one's own happiness) to an altruistic one (pursuing the general happiness), but there is surely no plain logical inference to be made here.

3 - general happiness is the **unique** or the **only** good at which action does and should aim.

Mill acknowledges that we value things like justice and virtue 'for themselves', so he has to get round this somehow. He does this by saying that when something is extremely valuable to us, we do indeed value it for itself, but that is only because such things actually form **part of happiness itself**:

'Virtue, according to the utilitarian conception, is a good of this description. There was no original desire of it, or motive to it, save its conduciveness to pleasure, and especially to protection from pain. But through the association thus formed, it may be felt a good in itself, and desired as such with as great intensity as any other good...' (p.291).

### **Utilitarianism as a form of Consequentialism**

Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism in virtue of its having a consequentialist *structure*, viz. we are to aim only at the maximization of the good (however conceived).

The moral evaluation of actions depends **solely** upon the goodness/badness of their consequences. Utilitarianism is the form of consequentialism which takes **happiness** as the thing to be maximized.

### **Some key features of standard consequentialism:**

- **maximization**: the obligation to do actions that produce maximal aggregate good. (This may be

relativized to what the agent can reasonably be expected to (i) foresee and (ii) bring off in practice.)

- **commensurability of values/goods** (J.Raz calls 'comparability'): all goods, and values, and reasons for action can be rated (and so ranked) according to a single ethical standard or 'currency'. No matter how apparently diverse the values that provide the reasons for doing a range of alternative prospective actions, it is possible in principle to rank them according to their relative strengths.

- **agent-neutrality of reasons**: the particular identity, projects, concerns of the agent are morally irrelevant to what s/he should do under the circumstances.

- **negative responsibility**: the agent is not only responsible for the consequences produced by his/her actions, but also those s/he failed through inaction to prevent.

### **Some key problems with utilitarianism's consequentialist structure:**

**1. Distributive justice** - or the 'separateness of persons' objection (Rawls, reproduced in Glover ed.). Direct consequentialism would seem to sanction any distribution of goods, however unfair, so long as it was (equal to) the **optimal** outcome in terms of **total good**.

Consequentialists may insist that such an unequal distribution is very unlikely in practice to maximize the good. In particular, the utilitarian may claim that one gets diminishing returns in terms of happiness/satisfaction from goods (cf. Smart); and this would entail that the maximal general happiness/satisfaction would be achieved by equal distribution. But then one might feel this response is unsatisfying on the grounds that it does not address the **principle** of the objection, which is that utilitarianism cannot make sense of the intrinsic value of distributive justice. A different kind of consequentialist may have more resources to respond to the objection, if s/he has more flexibility built into the conception of the good (see the Scanlon in Scheffler ed.).

**2. Intuitively unjust or horrible acts** - (see Nagel in Scheffler ed.)

Consequentialism can **morally oblige** someone to, e.g. shoot someone dead, or torture someone, if that best serves maximization. (See B.Williams' Jim and the Indians example and the question of integrity).

Some consequentialists (see Railton in Scheffler ed.) claim that if the agent lacks the moral *sang froid* to do the morally obligatory but horrible act, then this - though it is strictly a moral failing - would still be good long-term even by consequentialist lights. They say this on the grounds that such 'squeamishness' (Smart) increases the long-term chances that the agent will refrain from doing horrible acts on occasions when it is contrary to consequentialist morality.

Perhaps this point is best put in terms of what **sensibilities** or **character traits** (virtues?) it serves

consequentialism generally to encourage in people. (But, as with the objection from distributive justice, one might feel that this response fails to satisfy the question of principle that inspires the objection. Further, if those sensibilities or traits are thoroughly un-utilitarian in spirit, it raises the question whether utilitarianism is self-refuting.)

**3. Too demanding** - doesn't the obligation to maximize make unreasonably strong moral demands on us? (What should you have spent today doing? Why should I maximize the whole time, so long as I'm not doing any harm?)

**4. Impartiality the meaningful life** - Consequentialism seems to leave no private space for actions not falling under the obligation to maximize, where one is morally permitted to pursue those 'projects' with which one identifies, and which make one's life distinctively one's own.

Perhaps this critical angle points to an impoverished conception of the subject/agent on consequentialism's part: not so much as a **person** (an individual with own projects, concerns, relationships etc.), but more as an input-output channel for the general good. (See B. Williams' 'Persons, Character and Morality' in his *Moral Luck*, esp. last pages for the 'one thought too many' objection, relevant to even rule/indirect forms.)

**5. Supererogation** - consequentialism's constant obligation to maximize leaves no room for acts to count as supererogatory (beyond the call of duty). Obligation is all-encompassing.

**6. Negative responsibility** - are all more or less direct consequences of our actions equally our responsibility? What if one of the consequences is brought more directly about via the mediation of someone else's action? (See, again, Williams' Jim and the Indians example.)

This is far from an exhaustive list of possible objections, but do ask yourself carefully which ones, if any, **indirect** forms of consequentialism could overcome; and also whether such an indirect view would still be recognizable as a form of consequentialism.

**Act & Rule Utilitarianism**

Act: do that act which (taken individually) will maximize general happiness

Rule: act according to rules, general adherence to which will maximize general happiness

N.B. Mill did not make this distinction explicitly, but might be read as oscillating between the one and the other. He especially seems to adopt a rule utilitarian approach in his discussion of justice (ch.V).

### **Two key advantages of rule:**

1) **Justice:** rule ut'ism seems to evade the injustices that act ut'ism would sanction acts of injustice (e.g. sheriff hanging innocent man to avoid deaths from angry mob, cf. Smart's essay in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*).

But, it's unclear this evasion satisfies the original objection that ut'ism of whatever kind *in principle* sanctions injustice.

2) **Utility:** rule ut'ism seems to produce more happiness overall and in the long run:

a) **predictability** of others' actions helps the agent make accurate calculations

b) following rules is more time-**efficient** than doing lots of individual calculations, so less time for utility-maximizing is lost

c) the time-efficiency of rule-following allows for psychological and emotional **spontaneity** of action (which is something that makes people happy)

### **Counter-claims in favour of act utilitarianism:**

a') there's quite enough predictability already, since human behaviour is regular enough

b') act utilitarians don't need much time for calculating, because they can use rules of thumb

c') using rules of thumb also permits spontaneity

### **Distinguish different possible forms of rule utilitarianism**

- 'Kantian', where the agent asks herself 'would acting thus and so instantiate a rule, general adherence to which would maximize general happiness?'
- 'elitist', where some group or committee work out the best happiness-maximizing rules for everyone to follow, based on sociological and psychological data
- 'organic', where the rules just evolve through history as general norms of conduct geared to maximizing happiness [N.B. these are very much my own labels, (esp. the last one).]

### Two key disadvantages of rule utilitarianism:

1) It encourages an **unthinking** obedience to rules;

to which they utilitarian might reply that this is so only on (what I am calling) the 'elite' form of rule utilitarianism, which may be rejected on independent political grounds.

2) Rule worship and collapse (cf. Smart's essay in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*)

Rule utilitarians seem to face a dilemma: they can either be **strict** rule followers, or be **rule modifiers**. But neither seems satisfactory.

**Strict version** is vulnerable to the objection is that this will involve the agent in utilitarian **irrationality**, since s/he will be obliged to follow the rule **even** on those occasions when s/he can see perfectly well that disobeying it would produce more happiness.

**Rule modifier's version** is vulnerable to the objection that rule utilitarianism turns out not to be genuinely different from act utilitarianism, because unconstrained rule modification would just lead to its being **co-extensive** with act utilitarianism (i.e. prescribing all the same actions as act utilitarianism). Furthermore, it would not **only** be the same in practice, but it would also have **no distinctive theoretical content**, for the great long list of rules and their exception clauses would just be a long-hand way of expressing the single principle of act utilitarianism: the Greatest Happiness Principle.