

Chapter 13

Utilitarianism

1 Introduction

Chapter checklist

The chapter begins by outlining the motivation for developing a single-principle theory for determining how to make moral decisions. It examines Jeremy Bentham's hedonist version of utilitarianism, looking at his own formulation of the theory and use of the hedonic calculus. This then leads to discussion of some of the problems of act utilitarianism. The chapter draws a contrast between this and Mill's rule utilitarianism, with discussion of how this is exemplified in his essay *On Liberty*. It identifies problems with Mill's approach. It outlines Peter Singer's philosophy as an example of modern non-hedonist approaches. The final section discusses objections to utility, with particular reference to Kant's second form of the categorical imperative and the absence of any theory of natural rights.

Suppose a friend of yours has been invited to a garden party at Buckingham Palace. You like and care very much for your friend, who is a sensitive soul, easily hurt. She decides that she needs to buy a suitable dress. This worries you, as her sense of what is appropriate can sometimes be mistaken. She buys a dress in the brightest, even garish colours, badly cut, and perhaps appropriate for a dimly-lit nightclub but not for meeting the Queen. And the shoes she has chosen are asking for trouble if the palace lawns are damp.

You have a dilemma. You have been brought up by your parents and others with two principles. They have told you to be truthful. This is easily done, but liable to hurt your friend. But you have also been taught to be kind to people, to spare their feelings whenever you can. What do you do? Saying nothing or saying the dress is lovely spares hurt now, but at the cost of feeling yourself a liar and leading, perhaps, to the future embarrassment of your friend. But saying your friend's choice is horrid would hurt her. Probably you will end with one of those compromises that does no one any good, such as, 'It's an interesting choice' or 'You will certainly stand out!'

Key term

Precept A general rule designed to regulate behaviour or thought.

In such circumstances, we feel torn. Why is it so? It is because there is a clash of principles, in this case between the two precepts of always being truthful and always being kind to people. We are torn because obeying one leads us to fail in the other. We are dissatisfied with ourselves however we handle things.

What would be wonderful would be a life without this type of dilemma. To achieve it, we would need just one principle, a principle which would unfailingly show us what we needed to do. Complex choices would be made simple.

The claim of utilitarianism is to provide this simple and uncomplicated guide, by sticking to one simple principle, the 'principle of utility'.

It is interesting that utilitarianism is a product of the Enlightenment. Remember that Isaac Newton was the presiding genius of Enlightenment thought. Newton seemed to have demonstrated that the universe ran as a kind of giant machine, according to a few fixed and invariable laws. These laws were, in principle, knowable by human reason. This model of thinking gave hope to other thinkers that every problem could be resolved by such simple means.

The first stirrings of utilitarianism may be found in Hume. Hume thought that it was impossible fully to justify morality on rational grounds, but examination of our passions revealed their influence, about which we could reason. We seek our self-interest. Reason can, as it were, advise our moral approach, but ultimately something is only called immoral because it displeases us. Notice that this model is a very simple one. Human behaviour is explained with very few terms.

For more on Isaac Newton, see Chapter 5.

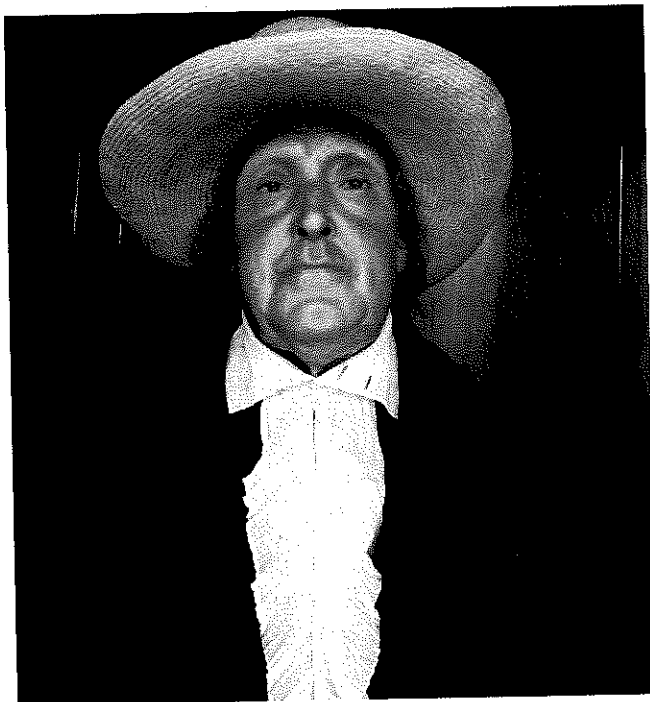
2 Jeremy Bentham and classical utilitarianism

Key term

Utilitarianism The moral doctrine that one should always seek the greatest balance of good over evil.

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) is usually considered the father of modern utilitarianism, even though his own version of utilitarianism was flawed because he smuggled in a second principle which raises questions, as we shall see. He was an archetypal Enlightenment figure, believing that human nature could be explained by the belief that we are psychological hedonists, so made that we always seek our own pleasure. If this is the way we are, then it makes sense to say that the good for humans would be maximising the pleasure we seek but minimising the pain that we avoid. Bentham applied this insight to his work as a social reformer. He sought to reform society on utilitarian lines. He supported many causes which have continued to be influential. He opposed slavery, the death penalty and corporal punishments such as flogging or caning with a birch (only finally abolished in English prisons in 1967), and mistreatment of animals. He supported equal rights for women, the right to divorce and sought decriminalisation of male homosexual acts. He believed in the separation of Church and State. As a liberal, he supported freedom of expression and economic freedom from regulation. His major work was in legal philosophy, basing his views on strict utilitarian principles. Much of his work in this field has only become available in recent years. His best work in the field, *Of Laws in General*, was not published until the twentieth century.

He believed in the strict application of his principles, not least in regard to his own death.



Jeremy Bentham – the auto-icon

He wished to make that a useful event, leaving his body to be first publicly dissected, for the good of medical science, and then turned into an auto-icon (a reminder of himself made from his own body) as a continual reminder of the principles he taught. This may be seen at University College, London, which he helped to establish.

3 Teleology and relativism

Utilitarianism is a strictly teleological theory in that its goal is the moral good of persons, although, as we shall see, there is no agreement among Utilitarians about precisely what that good is. For some it is pleasure, for most, happiness in some sense. The principle of utility seeks to achieve the good to the greatest possible extent: it is designed to enable us to achieve that goal.

Some forms of utilitarianism – such as Act Utilitarianism, as found in Bentham and others – are very situational, trying to work out in each dilemma what we should do to achieve the good. But it would be wrong to describe this outlook as relativist, because Utilitarianism in whatever form, has two absolute requirements – to work to achieve the good and always to follow the principle of utility to do so.

(a) Bentham's principle of utility

It is important to remember that the claim of utilitarianism is to provide a single principle to resolve the dilemmas of moral life, to be applied without exception. In simple terms, the principle takes some version of the form:

Seek always the greatest balance of good over evil.

Bentham himself wrote of it:

Create all the happiness you are able to create: remove all the misery you are able to remove. Every day will allow 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 peace and joy in the sanctuary of your soul.

Jeremy Bentham: 'Advice to a young girl' (22 June 1830)

The principle of utility judges any action to be right by the tendency it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interests are in question ... if that party be the community, the happiness of the community, if a particular individual, the happiness of that individual.

Jeremy Bentham: *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789 edition)

There are some problems with the principle of utility. It needs to be supplemented by the theory of what the good is.

(b) The hedonic calculus

Bentham took a simple view: he was a strict hedonist, arguing that happiness – and hence the good – is pleasure. It is important to notice that a hedonist is not saying pleasure is a good: he is saying pleasure is the good *and nothing else is the good*. The terms 'pleasure' and 'good' are interchangeable. This is a controversial view. Plato argued against it in *Gorgias* and elsewhere. An obvious issue is that, on this account, it seems impossible for there to be a 'bad pleasure'. Some people take pleasure in hurting others. It seems perfectly possible to call this a 'bad pleasure', but not at all to call it a 'bad good'. The latter phrase contains a contradiction absent from the former. If that is true, 'pleasure' and 'good' are not interchangeable terms. If they were, both phrases would make exactly the same sense in any sentences in which they were used.

But Bentham was insistent on his view of pleasure as the good. It seemed to provide the sort of simple answer he sought. He even attempted to develop a hedonic (or felicific) calculus for determining which act should be performed, using the seven criteria of:

- intensity (how strong is the pleasure?)
- duration (how long will the pleasure last?)
- certainty (how likely is it that the pleasure will truly happen?)
- propinquity (how soon will the pleasure happen?)
- fecundity (how probable is it that pleasant sensations will follow?)
- purity (how unlikely is it that the action will lead to pain rather than pleasure?)
- extent (how many people will be affected?).

Bentham spent years on the calculus, but he could never make a system that worked. His aim, of course, was to reduce life decisions to something which could be precisely calculated. The problem is that there are too many variables.

Suppose someone loves chocolate éclairs, and decides that eating a chocolate éclair equals 10 points of pleasure. In mathematical terms, it would then follow that eating two éclairs would equal 20 points of pleasure, and eating ten would equal 100. But ... even the most dedicated chocolate éclair lover might start to feel a little queasy after only seven or eight éclairs, which makes the assumption that eating ten at a sitting would be ten times as pleasurable as eating one just a little suspect. Then there are other factors to weigh up. Is an éclair as pleasant at breakfast time, or after a hot curry, or with a pint of beer, or after a nasty bout of gastro-enteritis?

Bentham's *Hedonist Utilitarianism* has been challenged from several perspectives. For Bentham, it was a mistake to try to distinguish types of pleasure. All that mattered was the pleasure felt. John Stuart Mill was unhappy about a narrow hedonism, concerned that there are higher and lower pleasures: in his essay, *Utilitarianism*, he writes: 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.'

(c) Alternatives to hedonism

It should be noted that while Bentham's utilitarianism was hedonist, it need not be so. Utilitarianism seeks the greatest balance of good over

Key persons

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832):

English legal and moral theorist, social reformer and proponent of hedonist utilitarianism. Devoted to social reform, he lived his life according to his principles.

Key term

Hedonism The philosophical view that the good is pleasure, and nothing else is the good.

For a profile of Mill, see Chapter 9.

evil, and the good might be something other than pleasure. Different utilitarians have different ideas of the good. Mill talks of 'happiness' rather than 'pleasure'. Surely, a search for the good should be for what is really good, not just bodily pleasures or what someone – perhaps mistakenly – takes to be preferable outcomes. Ideas on these lines led, following the publication of G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, to the growth of *ideal utilitarianism*, which argues that one should seek always the greatest balance of the ideally good.

(d) The greatest good of the greatest number?

Another issue is what Bentham actually taught as utilitarianism. One of the most famous phrases in philosophy is 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. It is attributed to Bentham, although it was first formulated by Francis Hutcheson in 1725. Some writers have unfortunately taken it to be the belief of utilitarianism as a whole. This is an error to be avoided.

There are two problems with the formulation.

The first, and perhaps more significant, is that it compromises the entire premise of utilitarianism, because it entails a principle of justice – and a very bad one – as well as one of doing good. There are now two principles – do good, and distribute the good in this way. It may be noted, incidentally, that the Christian precept of: 'Love your neighbour as yourself' is also two principles, a principle of love and the other of justice, telling us how to distribute that love. It is understandable how Bentham's formulation came about.

Suppose that I have £100 which I could share among my friends. I could give one friend £100, telling him not to tell my other nine friends. Those nine feel no pain, and he gets 100 points of pleasure. The net result is 100 points of pleasure, and no pain. But the same net result occurs if I give my friends £10 each: 10 points of pleasure each = 100 points, and no pain. So, what should I do? Simply telling me to maximise pleasure is incomplete, and the claim of utilitarianism is to avoid the problem of dilemmas, so that I always know what to do. By letting everyone count for one, and no one for more than one, I know what to do, spreading the good among the greatest number of people. However, there are other issues. Why do I not give 100 people £1 each? Is it appropriate to privilege people just because they are my friends? As we shall see, Peter Singer addresses the issue of privilege.

The second issue with the formulation is that Bentham himself came to repudiate it. In an unpublished manuscript, intended for James Mill, he wrote:

Greatest happiness of the greatest number. Some years have now elapsed since, upon a closer scrutiny, reason, altogether incontestable, was found for discarding this appendage. On the surface, additional clearness and correctness given to the idea: at bottom, the opposite qualities.

Bentham's reason for this repudiation was simple – the dangers of pleasing the majority and ignoring the minority. If the majority hurts the minority, as the 'greatest good of the greatest number' permits, then there is a smaller total amount of pleasure than if the good of the minority were made part of the total outcome.

(e) The rejection of natural rights

This does not deal with what for many is the great difficulty of all forms of utilitarianism: the denial of any notion of natural rights. To assert natural rights would be to produce a second principle which could interfere with utility. It could be argued, with some force, that a right to life and liberty of an individual interferes with the greatest general happiness. To say that the individual right to life is more important than the principle of utility would be a denial of utilitarianism.

Bentham is quite specific about this:

That which has no existence cannot be destroyed – that which cannot be destroyed cannot require anything to preserve it from destruction. Natural rights is simple nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense – nonsense upon stilts.

Jeremy Bentham: *Anarchical Fallacies* (1843)

It does not follow that for the utilitarian, rights cannot be enshrined in law as legal rights, if granting that legal right led to the greatest general happiness. It is interesting that John Stuart Mill, Bentham's pupil, in 1859 published *On Liberty*, which argues that in civilised societies, people should have maximum personal liberty. He claims:

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.

John Stuart Mill: *On Liberty* (1859), Chapter I: Introductory, paragraph 9

That might sound like the assertion of a right to liberty, but he does not apply it to all people. It is not applied to children or people in what he considers backward nations. In the same chapter he is clear that he appeals to the greatest general good. He accepts that maximum personal liberty may permit someone to harm himself. We may know that someone is harming himself through drinking too much, but this, for Mill, would not justify stopping him, though we may advise him to drink less. If we stopped him, we would be interfering with the greater general liberty. Everyone would be less free if we had a state in which people were stopped from doing what they wanted, and, according to Mill, we would all be worse off. He rejects natural rights:

It is proper to state that I forego any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right, as a thing independent of utility. I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being.

John Stuart Mill: *On Liberty* (1859), Chapter I: Introductory, paragraph 11

Key term

Act utilitarianism Believes that we should always perform the act which will lead to the greatest balance of good over evil.

Key term

Rule utilitarianism Believes that we should always follow that rule general adherence to which will lead to the greatest overall balance of good over evil.

Although Mill clearly endorses the principle of utilitarianism, there is an important difference between Mill and Bentham.

(f) Act utilitarianism

Bentham's approach is often seen as an example of **act utilitarianism**, the view that for each act we should determine which outcome leads to the greater general good, on a case-by-case basis. This is why he attempted his hedonic calculus to help determine in each instance the best outcome.

One of the problems with such an approach is that often people do not have sufficient time or information to make the necessary calculation. Some do not have the intellectual capacity, even if the information were available. To say to a child, 'Before you put your finger into that electric socket, calculate whether that would lead to the greatest pleasure (be careful to show your working)', would be absurd. It is much better for the parent to say, 'Never do that!' Always following the rule might lead to missing a particular instance of fun, but it would mean the best overall result.

(g) Rule utilitarianism

Rule utilitarianism, as endorsed by Mill, seems a more appropriate response. This argues that we should always follow the rule that will lead to the greatest balance of good over evil. In the case of the parent, she will be able to tell her child not to lie, not to steal and not to play on the railway tracks in the knowledge that if everyone follows these rules, we are all generally better off.

In the case of liberty, Mill argues that his general principle of liberty, if always followed, leads to the greatest general happiness, even though some people will go off the rails and do damage to themselves. The needs of the general good outweigh my individual issues with – for instance – drink or drugs.

The problem with rule utilitarianism is that it seems to place preservation of the rule above individual need. In the case of Mill's theory of liberty, he is reluctant to prevent individual harm, simply because the rule of maximising liberty should be adhered to for the greatest general happiness:

... there are questions relating to interference with trade, which are essentially questions of liberty; such as ... the prohibition of the importation of opium into China; the restriction of the sale of poisons; all cases, in short, where the object of the interference is to make it impossible or difficult to obtain a particular commodity. These interferences are objectionable, not as infringements on the liberty of the producer or seller, but on that of the buyer.

John Stuart Mill: *On Liberty*, Chapter V, paragraph 4

There is no need to look at the history of the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century for some to object to this line of reasoning. Mill's argument is that if we restrict freedom in these matters, then the entire principle of liberty is at risk. Therefore, the fact that some people will kill

For further discussion of people as ends, not means, read Kant's moral theory in Chapter 12.

themselves with drugs or poisons (and, presumably, find themselves unhappy in the process) is insignificant compared with letting individuals be as free as possible. But, for Mill, if I am an intelligent adult in an advanced society, I may use poison to kill myself, or opium to do likewise, because permitting my self-harm is for the greater general good. A critic would argue that this is a case of *instrumentalism* – the rule exists not for my good, but rather my misused liberty is an instrument – a means – of preserving the rule. The question to consider is whether persons exist for the sake of preservation of rules, or whether – as Kant would argue in the second form of the categorical imperative – everything should be done for the sake of persons, never using them as means only.

Another issue is that if it is difficult to calculate the good in an individual case, as we saw in the section on act utilitarianism, how much more difficult will it be to have confidence that adherence to a given general rule will have a better outcome than other possibilities? We know that, along the way, always keeping to the general rule of maximising liberty or always telling the truth will have some unfortunate outcomes for individuals, but it is doubtful that we can ever be certain that following the general rule will always and necessarily lead to the greatest balance of good over evil.

A further problem, and one perhaps fatal for rule utilitarianism, is that it compromises the claim of utilitarianism to resolve dilemmas of what we should do in every case. Rule utilitarianism permits the construction of more than one rule (after all, not all issues would be resolved if the only rule we had were Mill's principle of liberty). The moment we have more than one rule, we raise the possibility – even likelihood – or rule-clash, thus reintroducing the problems which utilitarianism was designed to avoid.

4 Peter Singer and preference utilitarianism

Key person

Peter Singer (b. 1946): Probably the most famous contemporary utilitarian. He was born in Melbourne where his Austrian Jewish parents sought refuge from Nazism. His maternal grandmother died in Theresienstadt concentration camp, and his paternal grandparents vanished without trace. He studied in Melbourne and Oxford, and for many years worked principally in Australia. In 1999 he became Professor of Bioethics in Princeton, New Jersey. His best-known works are *Practical Ethics*, first published in 1980 (2011), and *Animal Liberation* (1975, revised edition 1990). Each has been much discussed, and often incompletely understood, despite the remarkable clarity of expression throughout. Like Bentham, he lives his life on strict utilitarian principles.

Much of the most recent debate about Utilitarianism has centred on arguments by Peter Singer, the most famous modern representative of utilitarianism. Knowing his work is invaluable for thinking through many of the issues already discussed, and his concern to explore particular issues attracts much attention in the media.

In these arguments, Singer is in the tradition of Bentham. Bentham argued:

It may one day come to be recognized that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being ... What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not Can they reason?, nor Can they talk?, but Can they suffer?

Jeremy Bentham: *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1823, Chapter 17

Singer's arguments are developed by practical examples, many of which have proved controversial.

An instance of Singer's overall application of principles would be his treatment of the haemophiliac infant. (See *Practical Ethics*: third edition, Cambridge University Press, pp. 162–165.) Haemophilia is a condition carried by the female but inherited by males. This potentially fatal disease means that the blood cannot clot, and the haemophiliac child is in constant danger of death. If a mother carries the gene, there is a 50% chance that a male foetus will have the condition. As medicine stands, the condition cannot be detected before birth. Where the gene is in the mother, abortion is offered when tests show she is carrying a male foetus. Remember that Singer's aim is to reduce overall suffering. He considers the issue of replaceability. If a mother loses a child, he can in principle be replaced. Aborting a fetus because of a 50% chance of haemophilia seems unnecessary: it would be wiser to kill a haemophiliac child after birth, as there would be only half the destruction:

Self-awareness, which could provide a basis for holding that it is wrong to kill one being and replace it with another, is not to be found in either the fetus or the newborn infant. Neither the fetus nor the newborn infant is an individual capable of regarding itself as a distinct entity with a life of its own to lead, and it is only for newborn infants, or for still earlier stages of human life, that replaceability should be considered to be an ethically acceptable option.

Peter Singer: *Practical Ethics* (2011), pp.164–165

This conclusion is controversial because for many, it contradicts their belief in the sacredness of human life. Believers in natural human rights would reject the entire approach.

5 Objections to utilitarianism

There have been many objections to utilitarianism. The literature generated has been vast. Some doubts have been mentioned above, but other points are included below.

Key term

Teleological A principle whose goodness or rightness is determined by the outcome.

- Some have questioned whether utilitarianism should be considered a genuine moral theory at all. If the purpose of a moral theory is to do good, a theory which includes evil seems hardly a moral theory at all. Utilitarianism permits harm to be done, provided that the evil is outweighed by good. It may be questioned whether this can be called moral.
- The evil permitted may be needlessly great in ways that are counter-intuitive as well as wrong in themselves. Suppose I have two possible courses of action. If I perform one, I achieve 500 points of good, but no harm. In the other instance, I create 1,000 points of harm, but 501 points of good. Remember that utilitarianism demands that I always seek to achieve the greatest balance of good over evil. 501 is a greater balance than 500, so I should perform the second act, even though that is at the cost of great evil, when the first does no one harm. This seems odd, especially if we believe that the aim of the moral person is to do good and to avoid evil. By performing the second act, I have allowed great harm into the world. Intuitively, this seems wrong, as more and more great evils can be permitted for the sake of the greater good. It is helpful to consider this point in relation to Mill's arguments about buying opium or poisons, where to preserve the rule individuals are permitted to do great harm to themselves.
- There is in utilitarianism, as in any teleological theory, a fundamental question of how capable we are of calculating outcomes of the decisions we make. To make a sound decision we need all relevant information. This is not always available. Indeed, the nature of some situations means that not all the information *could* be available. We see things always from our perspective, and just as when we look at a landscape, some things are hidden from us because they cannot be seen from where we are standing. And even if we are in an ideal position to gather all possible information, we may be restricted in time. Sometimes – often – we need to decide our actions quickly. If a man is threatening a child, we need to act at once. It is not possible to go through a process of calculation.
- In the same way, we need sufficient intellectual ability to make the appropriate decisions. This is not true at all stages in life or for every person. Is someone not very capable of reasoning through a moral dilemma incapable of being moral?
- In any teleological theory such as utilitarianism, it becomes very difficult to determine whether the agent has performed a good act. If I save someone from drowning, the immediate action may be seen as good. I have reduced harm and maximised good, making me a good agent performing a good act. But the person I have saved might, in future, turn out to be a mass murderer. I could not have known this. Does my act then become a bad act, having been considered a good act when I performed it? The future consequences of apparently good acts are always uncertain. The person I saved might be a good person, but his son, who would not have been born had I not saved his father, might turn out to be the mass-murderer. Given that the future is unknown and there are so often unforeseen consequences, are we ever able to describe a given action as unequivocally good or bad?
- Morality entails more than doing the right thing. Part of morality and the moral life involves such activities as judging the actions of

Key person

Sir Bernard Williams (1929–2003): British moral philosopher. Taught at Oxford until 1988, then at Berkeley, California until his death. Author of many books and essays, including *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (1972), *Moral Luck* (1981), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985).

others, giving counsel and educating the young. As suggested above, it is much more sensible – and liable to bring better results – to tell a child always to obey a particular rule than to tell her always to work out the greatest balance of good over evil. In counselling, if I were a Benthamite hedonist, concerned only with my own pleasure, could I counsel you to act in your best interests, or should I always counsel you with my eye fixed on what would be best for me? Singer recognises that we need to be altruistic in our utilitarianism, so this objection might not appear so effective in his case as with Bentham. But if it is hard to determine my own best interests it is perhaps harder to determine the good outcome from your perspective than from my own. Judgements of any type seem fraught with difficulty.

- The absence of rights is an issue for anyone who believes that there are natural rights. Utilitarianism, in all its forms, seems to exalt the general goal of utilitarianism, whether that is pleasure or a more general happiness, above the person. It seems to make the good of the person secondary. A Kantian, but not only Kantians, would find this unacceptable. The second form of the categorical imperative ('So act as to treat everyone, yourself or another, always as ends, and never as means only') insists on the priority of ends over means, and the good for Kant is ultimately always the good of a person. Kantianism condemns the sacrifice of a person for an abstraction. A good is surely a good only if it is experienced as a good, and such experience can only be felt by someone (however that 'someone' is defined: we might wish our definition to apply also to sentient, suffering animals). If good is always good for a person, that suggests the priority of the person over even general happiness. The denial of natural rights seems to permit actual harm for a person for the sake of the general good.
- A slightly more difficult but ingenious objection has been developed by Sir Bernard Williams. A consequence of a utilitarian outlook is that the conscientious utilitarian will be always on her guard to prevent harm. To do this often entails taking preventative action, doing something in itself unpleasant to prevent something worse. If everyone were to act on utilitarian principles, then there would be these preventative but rather nasty acts taking place everywhere. The result would be a proliferation of acts which are evil in themselves, so the overall picture would be worse than if no one were performing these unpleasant acts. Therefore, on utilitarian grounds, it is better for the majority of people not to be utilitarians. That suggests that the only utilitarians should perhaps be a small elite. But if that were true, utilitarianism is a philosophy that most of us ought not to follow. Williams concludes:

... the world which would satisfy the utilitarian's aspirations would be a world from which belief in utilitarianism as an overall moral doctrine was totally absent ...

So, if utilitarianism is true ... then it is better that people should not believe in utilitarianism. If, on the other hand, it is false, then it is certainly better that people should not believe in it. So, either way, it is better that people should not believe in it.

Bernard Williams: *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (1993), p. 98

6 Conclusions

As an apparently simple and easily applicable moral theory, utilitarianism has provoked many reactions and many forms, and, as we have seen, many criticisms. Most of these have been about the extent to which it might be thought to diminish the human being. If morality is for the sake of humankind, it seems to many thinkers that utilitarianism promotes a principle above the person. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that in hard decisions, most people do indeed seek to do what will lead to the smallest amount of harm and the most good. Utilitarianism seems to take this reality of human decision-making and apply it to all cases.

The question is whether this is true of every case. Often, we experience no such difficulty. I do not calculate, normally, whether to tell the truth or whether to avoid murdering or raping people. This is not because of calculation, but because I just prefer truth-telling and not being involved in violence, and it seems overall a better world when I do so. But I do not coldly and unemotionally calculate these actions and non-actions. Most of the time, the overall good or harm is not a motive of which I am conscious, which suggests that utilitarianism is not a natural way of thinking.

Consider friendship. I meet people in a variety of contexts, and I find a connection with some of them – and they with me – and we call our relationship 'friendship'. If someone is my friend, she is my friend, we have an affinity. But it would be an odd sort of friendship if it rested on a cold calculation of the utility of the friendship and I broke the friendship because it might bring me distress if she needed me. Aristotle thought friendships based on utility unsatisfactory:

Utility is something impermanent as it changes according to circumstances. With the disappearance of the grounds for friendship, the friendship also breaks up, because this [utility] is what kept it alive.

Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*: Book VIII, iii

If utilitarianism's justification is based, as it seems to be, on the experience of hard cases, then we might think about the lawyers' saying that 'hard cases make bad law'. What the lawyers mean is that to make a general legal requirement from an individual difficulty leads to muddle and unexpected consequences. Perhaps the same is true of the moral theory based on the hard case.

Study advice

Here, as throughout the course, the most important thing is to treat arguments not as bullet-points to be learned but as matters to reflect on and to ponder as you reach your own conclusions. It is important to know the main types of utilitarianism. In preparation, reflect on possible criticisms. We have listed many, so it is valuable to think about this and to select the three or four about which you feel most confident. It is unlikely that you would have time in the examination to spell out every criticism we have indicated, or all the others that you may encounter in your reading.

Revision advice (continued)

Can you explain:

- the reasons why utilitarianism seeks to be a single-principle theory
- how Mill's approach to utilitarianism differed from that of his teacher, Jeremy Bentham
- how rule utilitarianism differs from act utilitarianism
- how utilitarianism treats questions of rights?

Can you give arguments for and against:

- hedonist treatments of utilitarianism
- individuals having natural rights even when contrary to the general good
- act utilitarianism
- rule utilitarianism?

Sample question and guidance

'In having no place for rights, utilitarianism fails as a moral theory.' Discuss.

This question asks you to reach a specific conclusion about the success of utilitarianism. Many objections could be brought against the theory, as we have seen, but this title asks you to concentrate on just one area of objection. Good answers would obviously sketch utilitarianism as a theory (though there is perhaps no need to describe every variety as, for this essay, the same points apply to them all), but go on to demonstrate why as a single-principle theory it can have no room for other considerations, especially those of natural rights.

It would be good practice to demonstrate your points with examples of utilitarianism in practice disregarding rights. Giving examples is always good in philosophical writing, both because doing so demonstrates understanding but also because a specific example can sometimes suggest further lines of thought that you can then use later in the essay.

In this essay it is also helpful to consider what natural rights might include. Most natural rights theorists include life and liberty, perhaps developing the list specifically to include ideas such as freedom of religion, speech and assembly. Some include rights to own property and also a right to security. In what ways might utilitarianism infringe on these rights? You might wish also to consider whether Mill's notion of liberty, based not on rights but utility, would sufficiently safeguard those things protected by rights theories.

In reaching your final judgement, take care to justify carefully the points you make.

Further essay questions:

Assess how valuable act utilitarianism is in resolving moral dilemmas.

To what extent is utilitarianism helpful in living a truly moral life?

'Rule utilitarianism works as a moral theory, but act utilitarianism does not.' Discuss.

Going further

The literature on utilitarianism is vast, and there is no easy way to grasp it all. Most textbooks on ethics have at least a chapter on the subject, not least because it has been so influential in the English-speaking world. Bentham's own writings are not always easy to read. John Stuart Mill's style is more approachable, though it can take a little while to become used to his sentence structure. Both his *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty* are brief texts and may be read for their richness in ideas. Peter Singer is always worth reading as a provocative and consistent thinker. His prose is very clear and it would be helpful to read at least Chapter One of *Practical Ethics*. As always, it is important to read original texts whenever possible.

The final chapter of Bernard Williams: *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, (Cambridge University Press, 1993) summarises a range of objections. These are explored in more detail in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge University Press, 1973). The discussion of utilitarianism in William Frankena: *Ethics* (Pearson, 1988) is concise but admirable, especially in its discussion of different types of utilitarianism. Michael Sandel provides a very clear exposition in his *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (Penguin, 2009).

Other books discussed in this chapter are:

- Singer P. *Animal Liberation*: Preface to 1975 edition (HarperCollins, 1975, revised edition 1990, Pimlico, 1995).
- Singer P. *Practical Ethics*: (third edition, Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- Williams B. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Collins, 1985).
- Williams B. *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- Williams B. *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1972/1993).