

## March, 12. Utilitarianism

### 1. Ethical utilitarianism = consequentialism + utilitarianism + hedonism + social principle

Consequentialism: whether an act is morally right depends only on *consequences* (as opposed to the circumstances or the intrinsic nature of the act or anything that happens before the act).

Utilitarianism: whether an consequence is valuable depends only on its utility

Hedonic principle: a pleasure is the only value; whether an act is useful depends on its connection with pleasure (happiness consists in pleasures)

Social principle: we must consider whether our action produces “social” happiness (not only happiness of some individuals)

Utilitarianism (consequentialism) versus deontology

Deontology: whether an act is morally good depends on its internal qualities (intention, purpose, compatibility with duty and obligation, compatibility with values)

“Classic utilitarianism is consequentialist as opposed to deontological because of what it denies. It denies that moral rightness depends directly on anything other than consequences, such as whether the agent promised in the past to do the act now. Of course, the fact that the agent promised to do the act might indirectly affect the act's consequences if breaking the promise will make other people unhappy. Nonetheless, according to classic utilitarianism, what makes it morally wrong to break the promise is its future effects on those other people rather than the fact that the agent promised in the past.” SEP

(<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism>)

„Actual Consequentialism = whether an act is morally right depends only on the *actual* consequences (as opposed to foreseen, foreseeable, intended, or likely consequences).

Direct Consequentialism = whether an act is morally right depends only on the consequences of *that act itself* (as opposed to the consequences of the agent's motive, of a rule or practice that covers other acts of the same kind, and so on).

Evaluative Consequentialism = moral rightness depends only on the *value* of the consequences (as opposed to non-evaluative features of the consequences).

Hedonism = the value of the consequences depends only on the *pleasures* and *pains* in the consequences (as opposed to other supposed goods, such as freedom, knowledge, life, and so on).

Maximizing Consequentialism = moral rightness depends only on which consequences are *best* (as opposed to merely satisfactory or an improvement over the status quo).

Aggregative Consequentialism = which consequences are best is some function of the values of *parts* of those consequences (as opposed to rankings of whole worlds or sets of consequences).

Total Consequentialism = moral rightness depends only on the *total* net good in the consequences (as opposed to the average net good per person).

**Universal Consequentialism** = moral rightness depends on the consequences for *all* people or sentient beings (as opposed to only the individual agent, members of the individual's society, present people, or any other limited group).

**Equal Consideration** = in determining moral rightness, benefits to one person matter *just as much* as similar benefits to any other person (= all who count count equally).

Agent-neutrality = whether some consequences are better than others does not depend on whether the consequences are evaluated from the perspective of the agent (as opposed to an observer).” SEP

Act and rule utilitarianism:

**Act utilitarianism:** only direct consequences of action must be considered

**Rule utilitarianism:** sometimes an act is good even if its direct consequence is wrong; one must consider the general rule and its consequences. Act utilitarianism evaluates an act by its actual consequences; rule utilitarianism evaluates an action by the consequences of its general or universal practice (considering all other persons and the future and past).

### **John Stuart Mill (1806-1783), *Utilitarianism***

Happiness is the ultimate goal of human activity;  
happiness consists in a pleasure;  
there are different kinds of pleasures  
these differences are qualitative and not quantitative only;  
it is better to be a man than an animal;  
a social context of human life must be taken into account;  
whether some activity is morally good depends on its (individual and social) utility; morally good action must produce “social happiness”.

**“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 of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.”**

There are different forms of pleasure:

Human and animal

Higher and lower

Spiritual and physical

With consciousness and without consciousness (spiritual consciousness)

**“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.”**

“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.”

“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”.

Moritz Schlick (1882-1936), *Problems of Ethics*:  
**Hedonism. Critical attitude to utilitarianism. Neopositivism. Psychologism in ethics.**

**The method of ethics is psychological:**

“The central problem of ethics concerns the causal explanation of moral behavior; all others in relation to it sink to the level of preliminary or subordinate questions. **The problem which we must put at the center of ethics is a purely psychological one.** For the discovery of the motives or laws of any kind of behavior, and therefore of moral behavior, is a purely psychological affair. Only the empirical science of the laws which describe the life of the soul can solve this problem. **What is called ethics would be nothing but a part of psychology!**”

If we decide that the fundamental question of ethics, "Why does man act morally?" can be

answered only by psychology, we see in this no degradation of, nor injury to, science, but a happy simplification of the world-picture. **In ethics we do not seek independence, but only the truth.**" 30-31

### **The Law of Motivation**

"In many, indeed most, situations of life the answer is easy to find; it lies so clearly at hand that it can be correctly given without further trouble by any unprejudiced judge, that is, by any man not led astray by philosophizing and moralizing. Such a person will tell us that, **at least in general, in a conflict of several ends-in-view, a man will act in the direction of the most pleasant.**"

What does this statement mean?

"Every idea, every content of our consciousness, as we learn from experience, possesses a certain tone. And this has the consequence that the content in question **is not something completely neutral**, or indifferent, but is somehow characterized as agreeable or disagreeable, attractive or repellent, joyful or painful, pleasant or unpleasant. We adopt the last mentioned terminology and say, every experience has an emotional tone that is pleasant or unpleasant, or, in the substantival language of psychology, **in every experience there is a feeling of pleasure or of pain.** [...] Here we should note that we use the words "pleasant" and "unpleasant" in the widest possible sense. [...]

**Of course, I have very different experiences when I stroke soft silk, when I attend a performance of Midsummer Night's Dream, when I admire an heroic act, when the proximity of a beloved person makes me happy;** but in a certain respect there is undoubtedly a similarity in the mental dispositions in all these cases, and we express this when we say that **all of them have pleasant emotional tones, or that all of them are joyful.** On the other hand, however different my feelings may be when I cut my finger, when I hear a violinist play a false note, when I think of the injustice of the world, when I stand at the bier of a friend, there is some kind of similarity in all these cases which still justifies me in considering them all as belonging to a single class, and in saying they are unpleasant feelings." 37-38

### **Critique of utilitarianism:**

"The first thesis which we have to defend and which asserts that "good" is what tends to further the happiness of society bears a special name in ethics; it is the moral principle of "Utilitarianism." It has this name because it says, roughly, **"Good is what is useful (utile) to human society."**

"The formulation of our thesis is perhaps not unessentially different from that which it received in the classical systems of Utilitarianism. These systems say (at least according to their sense) : **"The good is what brings the greatest possible happiness to society."** We express it more carefully: **"In human society, that is called good which is believed to bring the greatest happiness."**

"Utilitarianism did not attempt to find a meaningful convention, but believed that these words had a clear meaning, **presupposing that one can speak of the pleasure of different persons as of something comparable in magnitude. And this is the fundamental mistake.**"

## *Hierarchy of pleasures*

“After these explanations we can state that the decision of the will proceeds in the direction of the most pleasant end-in-view, in the following manner: **of the ideas which function as motives, that one gains the upper hand which finally possesses the highest degree of pleasant emotional tone, or the least unpleasant tone**, and thus the act in question is unambiguously determined. Two remarks must be introduced here. First, the decision occurs only after the difference in emotional tone reaches a certain point, because without this assumption it is obvious that no oscillation in "choice" could ever occur. The second remark is that when I describe the conflict of motives as an opposition of ideas, this is to be considered as a way of speaking only, and not as anything binding or compromising. Perhaps other psychic acts are involved, but this question can remain undecided for our purposes. **Before we discuss the validity of the above proposition, we must devote a moment to the difficulties which lie hidden in the notion of "most pleasant," or "least unpleasant."** The use of these phrases obviously presupposes that one can compare the different pleasant and unpleasant situations, and can speak of more or less with respect to feelings. However, this seems to be impossible, because the intensity of feelings (or any other psychical state) certainly cannot actually be measured, cannot be determined quantitatively. **This is doubtless true; a calculus of pleasure and pain with sums and differences of feelings would be meaningless.** Still, we can carry through the comparison of ideas with respect to their "pleasure value" or their "motivative power/" which is necessary for the understanding of acts of will. This follows from the fact that in every-day life we constantly say with sense and understanding, "I prefer this to that, but not as much as I like the other," and so forth. It seems to me that the matter sums up as follows: **When two ends-in-view, a and b, appear alternately before one, they are not directly balanced one against the other; but we find that, for example, the transition from a to b is an unpleasant experience, while the transition from b to a is pleasant. Thus we are able to say, by way of definition, that a with respect to b is the more pleasant or the less unpleasant idea.** In general, we must not consider the genesis of acts of will as a static balancing, but rather as **a dynamic process, a flux**, in which the waxing and waning and shifting of the images is at least as much tinged with feeling as are the images themselves.

Thus we see how one can speak sensibly of more or less with respect to pleasure and pain, without actually presupposing quantitative differences”.

Selected classic arguments against utilitarianism:

- It is impossible to cognise all consequences of an action
- how many consequences are to be considered?
- consequences of our action do not depend solely on our own activity
- there is a chance in the real world
- is it possible to talk about human responsibility? – if results of our action are partly independent of our intentions
- utilitarianism seems to reduce all morality to self-interested actions: social happiness is presented as consisted of happy individuals
- **“Man does not strive for happiness; only the Englishman does that.”** (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*)