Utilitarianism

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Utilitarianism is the ethical doctrine that the moral worth of an action is solely determined by its contribution to overall utility. It is thus a form of consequentialism, meaning that the moral worth of an action is determined by its outcome—the ends justify the means. Utility — the good to be maximized — has been defined by various thinkers as happiness or pleasure (versus sadness or pain), though preference utilitarians like Peter Singer define it as the satisfaction of preferences.

It can be described by the phrase "the greatest good for the greatest number", though the 'greatest number' part gives rise to the problematic mere addition paradox. Utilitarianism can thus be characterized as a quantitative and reductionistic approach to ethics.

Utilitarianism can be contrasted with deontological ethics (which focuses on the action itself rather than its consequences) and virtue ethics (which focuses on character), as well as with other varieties of consequentialism. Adherents of these opposing views have extensively criticized the utilitarian view, though utilitarians have been similarly critical of other schools of ethical thought.

In general use the term utilitarian often refers to a somewhat narrow economic or pragmatic viewpoint. However, philosophical utilitarianism is much broader than this, for example some approaches to utilitarianism consider non-human animals in addition to people.

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History

The origins of Utilitarianism are often traced back as far as the Greek philosopher Epicurus, but as a specific school of thought, it is generally credited to Jeremy Bentham.[1] Bentham found pain and pleasure to be the only intrinsic values in the world: "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure." From this he derived the rule of utility, that the good is whatever brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. Later, after realizing that the formulation recognized two different and potentially conflicting principles, he dropped the second part and talked simply about "the greatest happiness principle."

Jeremy Bentham's foremost proponent was James Mill, a significant philosopher in his day and the father of John Stuart Mill. The younger Mill was educated according to Bentham's principles, including transcribing and summarising much of his father's work whilst still in his teens.[2]
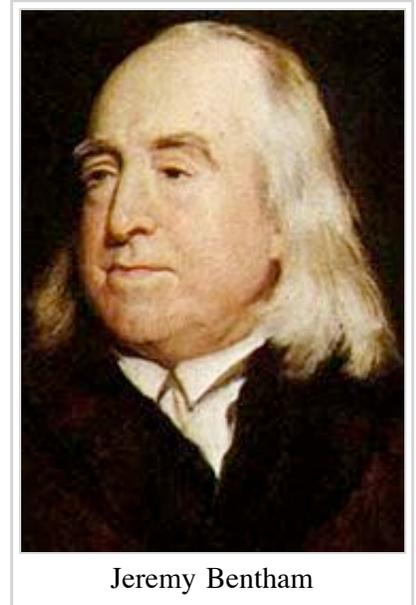
Jeremy Bentham

John Stuart Mill

In his famous short work, *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill argued that cultural, intellectual, and spiritual pleasures are of greater value than mere physical pleasure, because the former would be valued more highly by competent judges than the latter. A competent judge, according to Mill, is anyone who has experienced both the lower pleasures and the higher. Like Bentham's formulation, Mill's utilitarianism deals with pleasure or happiness.

The classic utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill influenced many other philosophers and the development of the broader concept of consequentialism. As a result, there now exist many different accounts of the good, and therefore many different types of consequentialism besides utilitarianism. For example, some philosophers reject the sole importance of well-being and argue that there are intrinsic values other than happiness or pleasure, e.g. knowledge and autonomy.

Other past advocates of utilitarianism include William Godwin and Henry Sidgwick; modern-day advocates include R. M. Hare, Peter Singer and Torbjörn Tännsjö.

Utilitarianism has been used as an argument for many different political views. In his essay *On Liberty* and other works, John Stuart Mill argued that utilitarianism requires that political arrangements satisfy the "liberty principle" (or harm principle), according to which "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."[3] Prevention of self-harm by other persons was considered expressly forbidden, although Mill states that potential self-harm is a reason for other persons to try to persuade a person not to do so.

Ludwig von Mises advocated libertarianism using utilitarian arguments. Likewise, some Marxist philosophers have also used these principles as arguments for political socialism.

Origin of the term

Mill claims that he "did not invent the word, but found it in one of Galt's novels, the 'Annals of the Parish,' in which the Scottish clergyman, of whom the book is a supposed autobiography, is represented as warning his parishioners not to leave the Gospel and become utilitarians. With a boy's fondness for a name and a banner I seized upon the word..."[4] Mill subsequently named his society of like minded thinkers the "Utilitarian Society", which met for three and a half years.

Types

Act vs. rule

Act utilitarianism states that, when faced with a choice, we must first consider the likely consequences of potential actions, and from that, choose to do what we believe will generate the most happiness. A rule utilitarian, on the other hand, begins by looking at potential rules of action. To determine whether a rule should be followed, he looks at what would happen if it were constantly followed. If adherence to the rule produces more happiness than otherwise, it is a rule that morally must be followed at all times. The distinction between act and rule utilitarianism is therefore based on a difference about the proper object of consequentialist calculation: specific to a case or generalized to rules.

Rule utilitarianism has been criticized for advocating general rules that will in some specific circumstances clearly decrease happiness if followed. To never kill a human might seem to be a good rule, but this could make defense against aggressors very difficult. Rule utilitarians would then add that there are general exception rules that allow the breaking of other rules if this increases happiness, one example being self-defence. Critics would then argue that this reduces rule utilitarianism to act utilitarianism, and the rules become meaningless. Rule utilitarians respond that the rules in the legal system (i.e. laws) which regulate such situations are not meaningless. For instance, self-defence is legally justified while murder is not.

Rule utilitarianism should not be confused with heuristics (rules of thumb). Many act utilitarians agree that it makes sense to formulate certain rules of thumb to follow if they find themselves in a situation in which the consequences are difficult, costly, or time-consuming to calculate exactly. If the consequences can be calculated relatively clearly and without much doubt, then the rules of thumb can be ignored.

Motive

This approach is an interesting hybrid between act and rule utilitarianism first developed by Robert Adams ("Motive Utilitarianism," Journal of Philosophy, 1976) which attempts to deal realistically with how human beings actually function psychologically. We are indeed passionate, emotional creatures, we do much better with positive goals rather than with negative prohibitions, and so on and so forth. Motive utilitarianism proposes that our initial moral task is to inculcate motives within ourselves that will be generally useful across

the spectrum of the actual situations we are likely to encounter (rather than the hypothetical examples we tend to end up obsessing about!). For example, similar to the 80-20 rule in business, we might be able to most improve the future package of experiences if we do a large number of activities in honest partnerships with others, even imperfectly, instead a few things sneakily by ourselves. Examples of motive utilitarianism in practice might be a gay person coming out of the closet and/or a politician publicly breaking with a war. In both cases, there is likely to be an initial surge of power and confidence, as well as a transitional period in which one is likely to be losing old friends before making new friends, and unpredictably so on both counts. Another example might be a doctor who is a skilled diagnostician. Such a physician is likely to have a good baseline in first principles and might occasionally go back to them. However, he or she is more likely to spend time and mental energies on secondary principles. That is, the doctor will spend time on what seems and feels like the next constructive chapter in patient communication and monitoring progress as it goes along, and only occasionally performing an interesting study in biochemistry.

Two-level

Two-level utilitarianism states that one should normally use 'intuitive' moral thinking, in the form of rule utilitarianism, because it usually maximises happiness. However there are some times when we must ascend to a higher 'critical' level of reflection in order to decide what to do, and must think as an act utilitarian would. Richard Hare supported this theory with his concept of the Archangel, which holds that if we were all 'archangels' we could be act utilitarians all the time as we would be able to perfectly predict consequences. However we are closer to 'proles' in that we are frequently biased and unable to foresee all possible consequence of our actions, and thus we require moral guidelines. When these principles clash we must attempt to think like an archangel in order to choose the right course of action.
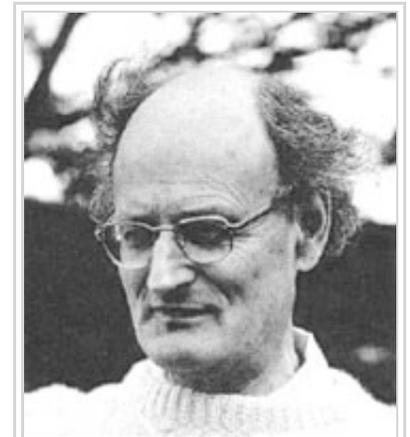
R. M. Hare

Negative

See also: Abolitionism (bioethics)

Most utilitarian theories deal with producing the greatest amount of good for the greatest number. **Negative utilitarianism** (NU) requires us to promote the least amount of evil or harm, or to prevent the greatest amount of suffering for the greatest number. Proponents argue that this is a more effective ethical formula, since, they contend, the greatest harms are more consequential than the greatest goods. The founder of NU referred to an epistemological argument: *"It adds to clarity in the fields of ethics, if we formulate our demands negatively, i.e. if we demand the elimination of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness."* (Karl R.Popper, The Open Society and its Enemies, London 1945). In the practical implementation of this idea the following versions can be distinguished:

1. Some advocates of the utilitarian principle were quick to suggest that the ultimate aim of NU would be to engender the quickest and least painful method of killing the entirety of humanity, as this ultimately would effectively minimize suffering. NU would seem to call for the destruction of the world even if only to avoid the pain of a pinprick [2] (http://www.utilitarianism.com/pinprick-argument.html) .

2. Newer, moderate versions of NU do not attempt to minimize all kinds of suffering but only those kinds that

are created by the frustration of preferences. In most supporters of moderate NU the preference to survive is stronger than the wish to be freed from suffering, so that they refuse the idea of a quick and painless destruction of life. Some of them believe that by time the worst cases of suffering will be defeated and a world of minor suffering can be realized. The principal agents of this direction can be found in the environment of transhumanism [3] (http://www.dmoz.org/Society/Philosophy/Ethics/Normative/Utilitarianism/Negative_Utilitarianism/) .

Supporters of moderate NU who do not believe in the promises of transhumanism would prefer a reduction of the population (and in the extreme case an empty world). This seems to come down to the position of radical NU, but in moderate NU the world could only be sacrificed to prevent extreme suffering and not to avoid the pain of a pinprick. And from the *preference for an empty world* does not follow a corresponding political claim. Such a claim would definitely (and in analogy to radical NU) be counterproductive. Pessimistic supporters of moderate NU therefore tend towards a retreat oriented way of living.

3. Finally there are theoreticians who see NU as a branch within classical utilitarianism, demanding for a higher priority in the fight against suffering. [4] (http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utilitarisme#Utilitarisme_n.C3.A9gatif) . This interpretation though cannot be counted as an independent version of NU, because it does not avoid Derek Parfit's "Repugnant Conclusion" [5] (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/repugnant-conclusion/) . NU is precisely characterized by overcoming this theoretical weakness of classical utilitarianism.

Average vs. total

Total Utilitarianism is the action of measuring the utility of a population based on the total utility of its members. It falls victim to the Mere addition paradox. Whereby large numbers of people with very low but non-negative utility values can be seen as a better goal than a population of a less extreme size living in comfort. This leads to Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion.

Average Utilitarianism is the action of measuring the utility of a population based on the average utility of that population. It avoids the Repugnant Conclusion. However, following the average principle could conceivably lead to a very small population of high utility. As such, a person good enough at utilizing resources (Nozick's Utility monster) will be given preference over others. The highest average utility would then be a population consisting only of the monster itself.

Total Utilitarianism also runs into problems related to Utility monsters however, since they may produce more total happiness than anything else.

Other species

Further information: Speciesism, animal welfare

Peter Singer, along with animal rights activists, has argued that the well-being of all sentient beings (conscious beings who feel pain, including animals) deserve equal consideration with that given to human beings. In fact, he considered that an intelligent ape should be given more consideration than a baby, since it is better at planning for its future (or 'expectation utility'). Bentham made a similar argument. Even those utilitarians arguing otherwise note that suffering in animals often causes humans to suffer, thus making it often immoral to harm an animal even if the animal itself is not given a moral status.

This view can be contrasted with deep ecology, which holds that an intrinsic value is attached to all forms of

life and nature. Because most forms of life are believed to be unable to experience anything akin to pleasure and/or discomfort, the utilitarian may deny any moral status to organisms like trees or oysters, or to natural entities like a river; their only value being in the benefit they provide for sentient beings. Some utilitarians however take in to account the future happiness of things that have not yet become sentient, whether in the form of very young or even prenatal children or in the form of animals that have not yet evolved consciousness. Similarly, many utilitarians places little or no intrinsic value on biodiversity, except that which arises from its use by sentient life.

It must be noted though that while there is at least a vague consensus on what constitutes sentience, there is very little if any on where the boundary line between sentience and not lies. A brain dead human is usually considered to be not sentient, but what about a severely mentally challenged person? What about a person in a coma?

Combinations with other ethical schools

In order to overcome perceived shortcomings of both systems, several attempts have been made to combine utilitarianism with Kant's categorical imperative. For instance, James Cornman proposes that in any given situation we should treat as "means" as few people as possible, and treat as "ends" as many people as are thus then consistent with those "means". He refers to this as the "Utilitarian Kantian Principle".

Other consequentialists may consider happiness an important consequence, but in addition argue that consequences such as justice or equality should also be valued, regardless if they increase happiness or not.

Biological explanation

Immanuel Kant

It has been suggested that sociobiology, the study of the evolution of human society, provides support for the utilitarian point of view. For example, in *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*, the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer argues that fundamentally utilitarian ethical reasoning has existed from the time primitive foraging bands had to cooperate, compromise, and make group decisions to survive. He elaborates: "In a dispute between members of a cohesive group of reasoning beings, the demand for a reason is a demand for a justification that can be accepted by the group as a whole." Thus, consideration of others' interests has long been a necessary part of the human experience. Singer believes that reason now compels the equal consideration of all people's interests:

> "If I have seen that from an ethical point of view I am just one person among the many in my society, and my interests are no more important, from the point of view of the whole, than the similar interests of others within my society, I am ready to see that, from a still larger point of view, my society is just one among other societies, and the interests of members of my society are no more important, from that larger perspective, than the similar interests of members of other societies… Taking the impartial element in ethical reasoning to its logical conclusion means, first, accepting that we ought to have equal concern for all human beings."

This conclusion — that everybody's interests should be considered equally when making decisions — is a core tenet of utilitarianism.
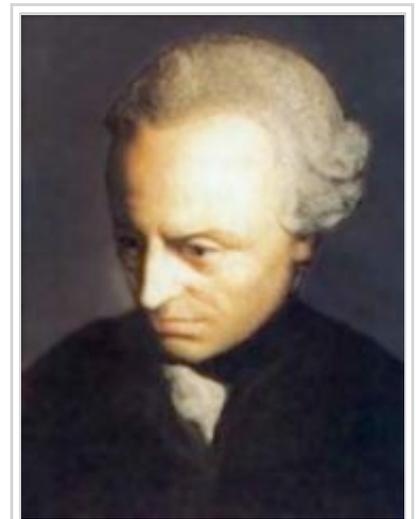
Singer elaborates that viewing oneself as equal to others in one's society and at the same time viewing one's society as fundamentally superior to other societies may cause an uncomfortable cognitive dissonance. This is the sense in which he means that reason may push people to accept a broader utilitarian stance. Critics (e.g. Binmore 2005) point out that this cognitive dissonance is apparently not very strong, since people often knowingly ignore the interests of faraway societies quite similar to their own. They also note that the "ought" of the quoted paragraph applies only to someone who has already accepted the premise that all societies are equally important. Singer has responded that his argument in *Expanding the Circle* wasn't intended to provide a complete philosophical justification for a utilitarian categorical imperative, but merely to provide a plausible explanation for how some people come to accept utilitarianism.

Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy*, makes this statement: "Darwinism was an application to the whole of animal and vegetable life... which was an integral part of the politics and economics of the Benthamites - a global free competition, in which victory went to the animals that most resembled successful capitalists."

Criticism and Defense

Comparing happiness

Another difficulty with utilitarianism is that of comparing happiness among different people. Many of the early utilitarians hoped that happiness could somehow be measured quantitatively and compared between people through felicific calculus, otherwise known as the hedonic calculus, although no one has ever managed to construct a detailed one in practice. It has been argued that the happiness of different people is incommensurable, and thus felicific calculus is impossible, not only in practice, but even in principle. Defenders of utilitarianism reply that this problem is faced by anyone who has to choose between two alternative states of affairs where both impose burdens to the people involved. If happiness were incommensurable, the death of a hundred people would be no worse than the death of one. Triage is an example of a real world situation where utilitarianism seems to be applied relatively successfully (but at the same time, the utilitarian would also begin preparations to better handle future emergencies). Perhaps an even better real-world example of comparisons and tradeoffs might be various systems of progressive income taxation, in which the first level of income is taxed at 10%, the next level at 15%, and so on. A related example is a mixed economic system, in which housing, education, and medical care are provided out of the general tax revenue, and from this baseline, various entrepreneurial activities can be funded.

An oft-cited "dilemma" of utilitarianism is that the pleasure of a sadist should have the same importance as the pleasure of an altruist. Supporters of utilitarianism note that in practice almost no decision will be made to cater to the sadist. While creating pleasure for an altruist simultaneously helps other people, creating pleasure for a sadist simultaneously hurts other people. Furthermore, many utilitarians feel that the sadist's pleasure is superficial and temporary, thus it is detrimental to the sadist's long term well-being. Therefore, in practice, the pleasure of a sadist almost never has any significant weight in a utilitarian calculation. By principle, Mill argues that as a sadist does not take into account the value of another's happiness (utility) his in this context should not be considered. One argument is that since sadists are few in number, the ignorance of their system of pleasure is another continuation of utilitarianism, where the set of those involved refers to itself.

Predicting consequences

Daniel Dennett uses the example of Three Mile Island as another example of the difficulty in calculating

happiness.[5] Was the near-meltdown that occurred at this nuclear power plant a good or a bad thing (according to utilitarianism)? He points out that its long-term effects on nuclear policy would be considered beneficial by many and might outweigh the negative consequences. His conclusion is that it is *still too early* (28 years after the event) for utilitarianism to weigh all the evidence and reach a definite conclusion. Utilitarians note that utilitarianism seems to be the unspoken principle used by both advocates and critics of nuclear power. That something cannot be determined at the moment is common in science and is frequently resolved with further advancements.

Utilitarians, however, are not required to have perfect knowledge; indeed, certain knowledge of consequences is impossible because consequences are in the unexperienced future. Utilitarians simply try their best to maximize happiness (or another form of utility), and to do this, make their best estimates of the consequences. If the consequences of a decision are particularly unclear, it might make sense to follow an ethical rule which has promoted the most utility in the past. Utilitarians will also note that people trying to further their own interests run into situations in which the consequences of their decisions are very unclear. This does not mean that they are unable to make a decision.

Anthony Kenny argues against utilitarianism on the grounds that determinism is either true or false. If it is true, then we have no choice over our actions. But if it is false then the consequences of our actions are unpredictable, not least because they will depend on the actions of others whom we cannot predict.[6]

Importance of intentions

Utilitarianism has been criticized for only looking at the results of actions, not at the desires or intentions which motivate them, which many people also consider important. An action intended to cause harm but that inadvertently causes good results would be judged equal to the result from an action done with good intentions. However, many utilitarians would argue that utilitarianism applies not only to results, but also to desires and dispositions, praise and blame, rules, institutions, and punishment. For instance, bad intentions may cause harm (to the actor and to others) even if they do not result in bad acts. Once this is recognized, supporters argue that utilitarianism becomes a much more complex, and rich, moral theory, and may align much more closely with our moral intuitions.

Furthermore, many utilitarians view morality as a personal guide rather as a means to judge the actions of other people or actions which have already been performed. In other words, morality is something to be looked at when deciding what to do. In this sense, intentions are the only thing that matter, because the consequences cannot be known with certainty until the decision has already been made.

One philosopher to take this view was Henry Sidgwick in his main work *The Methods of Ethics*, 1874 (http://www.la.utexas.edu/research/poltheory/sidgwick/me/index.html) .

Human rights

Utilitarians may argue that justification of slavery, torture or mass murder would require unrealistically large benefits to outweigh the direct and extreme suffering to the victims. Utilitarianism would also require the indirect impact of social acceptance of inhumane policies to be taken into consideration; for example, general anxiety and fear might increase for all if human rights are commonly ignored. This was an early objection to utilitarianism, and in *On Liberty* John Stuart Mill argued that a citizen obeying the concept of utilitarianism could not possibly wish ill on another individual for his own personal pleasure--while in the aggregate, cruelty could create a 'net' happiness, the individual's sadism is reprehensible under the utilitarian ethos.

Act and rule utilitarianisms differ in how they treat human rights themselves. Under rule utilitarianism, a human right can easily be considered a moral rule. Act utilitarians, on the other hand, do not accept human rights as moral principles in and of themselves, but that does not mean they are rejected altogether. First, most act utilitarians, as explained above, would agree that acts such as enslavement and genocide always cause great unhappiness and little happiness. Second, human rights could be considered rules of thumb; although torture might be acceptable under some circumstances, as a rule it is immoral. Finally, act utilitarians often support human rights in a legal sense, because utilitarians support laws that cause more good than harm.

Individual interests vs. a greater sum of lesser interests

Since utilitarians judge all actions by their ability to maximize good consequences, any harm to one individual can often be justified by a greater gain to other individuals. This is true even if the loss for the one individual is large and the gain for the others is marginal, as long as enough individuals receive the small benefit. Thus, utilitarians deny that individuals have inviolable moral rights. As explained above, utilitarians may support legal rights or rights as rules of thumb, but they are not considered inherent to morality. This seems problematic to many critics of utilitarianism, one of whom notes that according to utilitarianism there is "nothing intrinsically wrong with sacrificing an important individual interest to a greater sum of lesser interests. That assumption is retained in the foundations of the theory, and it remains a source of moral concern."[7]

Although the above criticism may not be, two other related criticisms of utilitarianism are based on misconceptions. The principle of "the greatest good for the greatest number", introduced by Bentham, is often mistaken as meaning that if something hurts one person and helps many, it is always morally justified. This is not the case, however; as noted above, Bentham dropped the misleading "greatest number" part of the principle, replacing the original formulation with the more direct "greatest happiness principle." Thus, the morality of an action is not determined by the number of people made happier, but rather the quantity of happiness produced. A great loss to one individual *might* be outweighed by small gains for many, but it might not. Even if 1 person is hurt and 100 people are helped, the harm to the one might be so great as to outweigh the small gains for the rest of the people.

Second, some criticize utilitarianism for implying that individuals' interests can be sacrificed for the sake of the "society" or the nation. Modern utilitarianism however proposes that one individual's interests can only be sacrificed for the sake of the interests of other individuals. As Bentham put it, "The interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals: no wonder that the meaning of it is often lost. When it has a meaning, it is this. The community is a fictitious body, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community then is...the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it." [6] (http://www.la.utexas.edu/labyrinth/ipml/ipml.c01.html) While it may benefit individuals to have a healthy society or a functional state, neither of these are ends in themselves.

Right and wrong dichotomy

A further criticism is in regard to Utilitarianism's judgement of right and wrong. Utilitarianism holds that in any given situation the 'right' act is that which produced the greatest good, while all other acts are wrong. Therefore even charitable actions could be considered wrong under this theory. For example, if someone donated $1,000 to a charity that provided starving children with food when that person could have donated the money to a charity that does the same thing but is more efficient, and in doing so created even more good, that

decision would be judged as incorrect by Utilitarianism.

In response to criticism of this nature the contemporary philosopher and utilitarian William Shaw claimed that, although Utilitarianism would clearly dictate the above conclusion, a good utilitarian would still praise the wrongdoer for their charitable donation even though it is wrong. This is because punishing such a person would likely push them to no longer make any charitable contributions, so praising the wrongdoer would better serve the greater good than punishing them.

Furthermore, the decision to donate to charity was still morally good, even if the decision to ignore efficiency was immoral. And since utilitarianism presumes imperfect knowledge, any immoral behavior relative to the charity's inefficiency would be limited by the difficulty in determining the charities' relative effectiveness.

Proof

Another criticism of utilitarianism is that it is not *proven* by science or logic to be the correct ethical system. However, supporters claim that this is common to all ethical schools (and indeed the system of logic itself) and will always remain so unless the problem of the regress argument or at least the is-ought problem is satisfactorily solved. Indeed, utilitarians are some of the first to recognize this problem. It might instead be argued that almost all political arguments about a future society use an unspoken utilitarian principle, all sides claiming that their proposed solution is the one that increases human happiness most. Some degree of utilitarianism might very well be genetically hard-coded into humans.

Mill's argument for utilitarian is as follows: Pleasure is the only thing desired; therefore pleasure is the only thing desirable. Critics argue that this is like saying that things visible are things seen, or that the only things audible are things heard. A thing is 'visible' if it can be seen, and 'desirable' if it ought to be desired. Thus 'desirable' is a word presupposing an ethical theory - we cannot infer what is desirable from what is desired.

Case for morality

Critics have also asked why one should follow utilitarianism instead of egoism. A legal system might punish behavior which harms others, but this incentive is not active in a situation where one can personally gain by breaking it and others cannot punish this. However, one egoist may propose means to maximize self-interest that conflicts with the means proposed by another egoist. As a result, they are behooved to compromise with one another to avoid conflict, out of self-interest. The means proposed *may* incidentally coincide with those prescribed by utilitarianism, though the foundational ethical imperative would not, of course, be utilitarian.

Another reason for an egoist to become a utilitarian was proposed by Peter Singer in *Practical Ethics*. He presents the paradox of hedonism, which says that if your only goal in life is personal happiness, you will never be happy; you need something to be happy about. One goal which Singer feels is likely to bring personal happiness is the desire to improve the lives of others. This argument is similar to the one for virtue ethics.

Karl Marx's arguments

Karl Marx, in *Das Kapital*, writes:

> " Not even excepting our philosopher, Christian Wolff, in no time and in no country has the most homespun commonplace
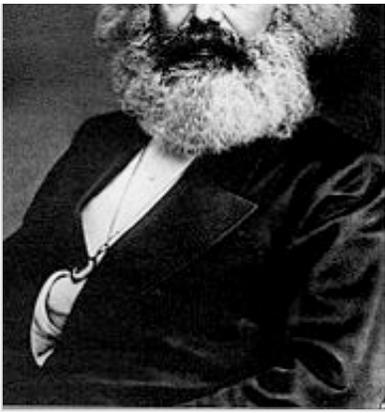
Karl Marx

ever strutted about in so self-satisfied a way. The principle of utility was no discovery of Bentham. He simply reproduced in his dull way what Helvétius and other Frenchmen had said with esprit in the 18th century. To know what is useful for a dog, one must study dog-nature. This nature itself is not to be deduced from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would criticise all human acts, movements, relations, etc., by the principle of utility, must first deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch. Bentham makes short work of it. With the driest naiveté he takes the modern shopkeeper, especially the English shopkeeper, as the normal man. Whatever is useful to this queer normal man, and to his world, is absolutely useful. This yard-measure, then, he applies to past, present, and future. The Christian religion, e.g., is "useful," "because it forbids in the name of religion the same faults that the penal code condemns in the name of the law." Artistic criticism is "harmful," because it disturbs worthy people in their enjoyment of Martin Tupper, etc. With such rubbish has the brave fellow, with his motto, "nulla dies sine line!," piled up mountains of books.[8]

Marx's accusation is twofold. In the first place, he says that the theory of utility is true by definition and thus does not really add anything meaningful. For Marx, a productive enquiry would have to investigate what sorts of things are good for people; that is, what our nature (which he believes is alienated under capitalism) really is. Second, he says that Bentham fails to take account of the *changing* character of people, and hence the changing character of what is good for them. This criticism is especially important for Marx, because he believed that all important statements were contingent upon particular historical conditions. Marx argues that human nature is dynamic, so the concept of a single utility for all humans is one-dimensional and not useful. When he decries Bentham's application of the 'yard measure' of now to 'the past, present and future', he decries the implication that society, and people, have always been, and will always be, as they are now; that is, he criticizes essentialism. As he sees it, this implication is conservatively used to reinforce institutions he regarded as reactionary. Just because in this moment religion has some positive consequences, says Marx, doesn't mean that viewed historically it isn't a regressive institution that should be abolished.

Marx's criticism is more a criticism of Bentham's views (or similar views) of utility, than utilitarianism itself. Utilitarians would not deny that different things make different people happy, and that what promotes happiness changes over time. Neither would utilitarians deny the importance of investigations into what promotes utility.

Marx's criticism applies to all philosophy which does not take explicit account of the movement of history (against dialectics). While he's right that all things change, and that it is necessary to take account of this when making practical judgements, this doesn't mean that it isn't useful to have a theory which gives some means to evaluate those changes themselves.

Also, utilitarianism was originally developed as a challenge to the *status quo*. The demand that everyone count for one, and one only, was anathema to the elitist society of Victorian Britain.

The Wittgensteinian Critique

Contemporary philosophers such as Cora Diamond and Matthew Ostrow have critiqued utilitarianism from a distinctly Wittgensteinian perspective; according to these philosophers, utilitarians have expanded the very meaning of pleasure to the point of linguistic incoherence. The utilitarian groundlessly places pleasure as his or her first principle, and in doing so subordinates the value of asceticism, self-sacrifice or any other "secondary" desire. Of course, the utilitarian will deny this contention altogether, claiming that ascetics also seek pleasure, but have merely chosen an alternative path in which to achieve it. Yet such an argument is implicitly tautological ("What is it that people want? Pleasure. But what is pleasure? What people want."). The utilitarian therefore has no ultimate justification for primarily valuing pleasure, other than to say that "this is the way it should be." In this critique, utilitarianism is thus ultimately reduced to a form of dishonest ethical intuitionism, unable to recognize or acknowledge its own groundlessness. Or in the words of Wittgenstein, utilitarianism is blind to its "own metaphysical impulse" (a trap which Deontology also undoubtedly falls victim to).

Criticism of other schools

One criticism is that many other schools cannot even in theory solve real world complex ethical problems when various inviolable principles collide, like triage or if the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the right decision.

A criticism of Kantianism is leveled by R. M. Hare in Could Kant Have Been a Utilitarian? (http://deontology.com/) . He argued that a number of different ethical positions could fit with Kant's description of his Categorical Imperative, and although Kant did not agree with this assessment, utilitarianism could be among them.

See also

This entry is related to, but not included in the Political ideologies series or one of its sub-series. Other related articles can be found at the Politics Portal.

- Altruism (ethical doctrine)
- Eudaimonism
- Greedy reductionism
- Gross National Happiness
- List of Utilitarians
- Social Choice and Individual Values for Arrow's theorem on the impossibility of a consistent ordinalist (behavior-based) utilitarianism satisfying certain apparently reasonable conditions
- Utilitarian bioethics

Notes

1. ^ Rosen, Frederick (2003). *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill*. Routledge, pg. 28. ISBN 0415220947 "It was Hume and Bentham who then reasserted most strongly the Epicurean doctrine concerning utility as the basis of justice."
2. ^ Mill, John Stuart. 'On Liberty', ed. Himmelfarb. Penguin Classics, 1974, Ed.'s introduction, p.11.
3. ^ Mill, John Stuart. 'On Liberty', ed. Himmelfarb. Penguin Classics, 1974, 'Introductory' of main text, p.68.
4. ^ Borchard, Ruth (1957), *John Stuart Mill, The Man*. London: Watts.

5. **^** Dennett, Daniel (1995), Darwin's Dangerous Idea, Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-684-82471-X.
6. **^** Anthony Kenny *What I Believe* p75-80
7. **^** Waldron, Jeremy. 'Rights' in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. Goodin, Robert E. and Pettit, Philip. Blackwell Publishing, 1995, p.581.
8. **^** [1] (http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch24.htm#n50)

References and further reading

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- Harwood, Sterling, "Eleven Objections to Utilitarianism," in Louis P. Pojman, ed., Moral Philosophy: A Reader, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 2003), and in Sterling Harwood, ed., Business as Ethical and Business as Usual, Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1996, Chapter 7.
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External links

- Utilitarian Philosophers (http://www.utilitarian.net) . Large compendium of writings by and about the major utilitarian philosophers, both classic and contemporary.
- Utilitarianism (http://www.rsrevision.com/Alevel/ethics/utilitarianism/index.htm) Different versions of the theory explained, applied and evaluated.
- Utilitarian Resources (http://www.Utilitarianism.com) . Collection of definitions, articles and links.
- Felicifia (http://felicifia.com) . Online utilitarianism community.
- Charity International (http://www.charity.se) . The only utilitarian organization in the world.
- Utilitarianism FAQ (http://www.ianmontgomerie.com/manifesto/utilitarianfaq.html) Frequently Asked Questions on utilitarianism.
- Notes on Utilitarianism (http://webs.wofford.edu/kaycd/ethics/util.htm) . A convenient summary of the major points of utilitarianism.
- Consequentialism (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/) From the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Rule Consequentialism (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism-rule/) From the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Utilitarianism (http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15241c.htm) From the Catholic Encyclopedia.
- "Utilitarianism as Secondary Ethic" (http://www.sethpayne.com/pdf/bentham.pdf) An overview of utilitarianism with summary of its critiques.