

# UTILITARIANISM – BENTHAM, MILL, SINGER, AND THEIR CRITICS

This week's reading will try to weigh the relative merits of utilitarian and rights-based (or deontological) approaches to ethics and politics. Keep in mind throughout that there is no easy answer to any of these questions, and that 'figuring out where you stand' is more a matter of deciding whether you *tend* more towards utilitarian or deontological frameworks: it is the rare person indeed who is *purely* a **consequentialist** utilitarian or *purely* a deontologist. [Also keep in mind that there are *other* types of consequentialists, i.e. people who care about different ends than preference-maximization. Consequentialism simply means that the ends literally justify the means—indeed, for a consequentialist, nothing else can!]

## To keep in mind while reading

- The difference between **act utilitarianism** from **rule utilitarianism**, and whether rule utilitarianism is even a useful category if it collapses when presented with extenuating circumstances: i.e., 'always do x except when circumstances are such as to make not doing x the better option' (or whether it's precisely because it adapts to extreme circumstances that it's useful—these are two very different views of politics, both of which have very compelling evidence to support them). It's also important to distinguish between **positive** and **negative utilitarianism**, which seek respectively to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.
- Roberts and Sutch provide a mnemonic to distinguish consequentialism from deontology. For consequentialists, **the good is prior to the right**, whereas for deontologists the **right is prior to the good**. What does this mean?
- Roberts and Sutch tend to underplay the connection between utilitarianism and **animal welfare** (**animal rights** proponents, on the other hand, tend to be deontologists—why would this logically be the case?), and the Singer essay *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* has nothing to do with nonhuman animals, but keep in mind while reading how radically changed the 'moral arithmetic' becomes when you introduce nonhuman animal interests to the calculation of the greatest good.
- How is political utilitarianism arguably a very radical—even destabilizing—doctrine? How is it helpful in providing a focal point around which people of different beliefs can rally? (answer: "by identifying utility as a common denominator...utilitarianism provides a counterpoint to concerns about relativism"...but is this really an answer?)
- While reading Mill's "On Liberty", keep the following in mind: J.S. Mill's "Utilitarianism" (1861) was written two years after "On Liberty" (1859), but the influence of utilitarian thinking is very strong on both—try to view his defense of freedom of speech in light of what you know about utilitarianism (i.e., how could the argument that 99 voices should *not* have the right to silence one voice—precisely Mill's argument—be a utilitarian argument??)

## Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832): *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*

Bentham opens his work with the following sentence: "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*." As Gingell *et al* point out in their introduction, nowhere does he defend or justify this claim. Does it need defending? More refined interpretations of utilitarianism—including Mill's—would defend instead a broader **utility function**, but Bentham's vision was quite narrow. What is the **principle of utility**, according to Bentham, and why does he say that natural law and natural rights are "nonsense upon stilts".

How does Bentham define the "interest of the community"? What are the implications of his **aggregative** model? What are the positive effects of acknowledging that 'each is to count for one and nobody for more than one'? The negative effects?

"An action...may be said to be conformable to the principle of utility...when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it." As John Rawls, a prominent modern deontologist, notes (in IPT): 'during much of modern moral philosophy the predominant systematic theory has been some form of utilitarianism'. Is "**the greatest good for the greatest number**" a useful moral ideal? In all cases? In some cases? Why or why not?

How does Bentham categorize types of pleasure and pain? (IPT 232-4) Are you satisfied that his model addresses at least some of the nuances of public policy decisions? [n.b.: look up the definition of any key words you don't know!]

One of the main problems with the kind of moral arithmetic Bentham proposes is that we live in a state of **imperfect information** in which different individuals have different utility functions; in essence, Bentham is **quantifying the qualitative** nature of some preferences. To what extent do you think it's useful (or necessary) to do so? What are some examples of quantifiable preferences? Of non-quantifiable preferences? And, even if it were possible to quantify and **commensurate** the value of discrete preferences, do you think it's the right way to go about forming policy? (because a whole lot of public policy *is* formed on this model—indeed, Bentham is regarded as one of the ‘fathers of the welfare state’)

### **John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), “On Liberty”**

Key claim: “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.” (MPT 238)

Another key claim: “If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.” (MPT 239) Mill spends the rest of the passage defending this claim, *on utilitarian grounds*. What are some of the arguments he lays out (read these passages carefully: they are brilliantly argued, and are among the most well-regarded defenses of liberalism in the history of political philosophy. He sums up his arguments at the end of 247).

### **Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (1972, with a postscript)**

Here are the core arguments of Singer’s arguments, which, as usual, are ‘logical to a fault’

1. “the way people in relatively affluent countries react to a situation like that in Bengal cannot be justified”
2. Postulate A: “suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.”
3. Postulate B: “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.” (This is the ‘strong form’ – the ‘moderate form’ removes the word ‘comparable’)
4. Key hypothetical: “if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.”
  - a. Because of the transformation of transport and the media, distance is no longer a relevant moral category
5. “Charity” is now regarded as a “**supererogatory**” act (that is: good to do, but not wrong not to do). Rather, “we ought to give the money away, and it is wrong not to do so.”

What are some of the responses Singer then addresses in his paper, and how does he respond to them in turn?

Are you swayed by his argument (either in whole or in part)? Is he overlooking any significant moral categories by jumping from his pond hypothetical to, say, the fact that a 3\$ malaria net could save the life of a sub-Saharan African child (this is the example most commonly used by Jeffrey Sachs, author of *The End of Poverty* and ‘superstar economist’)?

### **Problems with utilitarianism**

Two groups of criticisms: 1) utilitarianism underestimates moral complexity; and 2) utilitarian distorts moral boundaries

Nozick’s “pleasure machine” as an argument against ‘crude utilitarianism’. Is there a ‘sophisticated utilitarian’ response?

### **Rights and Deontology: Strengths and Weaknesses**

The **categorical imperative**, rights as ‘trumps’ that cannot be violated (regardless of rule utilitarianism’s “circumstances”)

Distinguishing civil and political rights, as well as moral and legal rights [to be revisited with Rawls]

While utilitarianism may, for some have too inclusive a moral scope, the rights model may be too exclusive. How so? Similarly, while utilitarianism may be too flexible, deontology may be too inflexible (Williams’ ‘Indian-shooting’ case)