

CHAPTER 8



Utilitarianism

The Greatest Happiness Principle

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do.

—JEREMY BENTHAM, *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789)¹

It is the business of the benevolent man to try to promote what is beneficial to the world and to eliminate what is harmful.

—MO TZU, *Universal Love*, Pt. III, Sect. 16

Americans are evenly split over whether it is morally acceptable to use torture—also known as “enhanced interrogation techniques”—on a terrorist suspect to obtain information that might prevent a future terrorist attack.² The debate over the use of torture is based primarily on utilitarian thinking: that is, will torture result in more beneficial consequences and prevent more harm and suffering in the long run, than using other, less extreme, interrogation techniques?

Former Vice President Dick Cheney supports the use of torture in extreme cases. He maintains that enhanced interrogation techniques, such as water boarding, were essential in collecting information that has prevented further terrorist attacks on U.S. soil following the attack of September 11, 2001. He also claims that these techniques were used only on hardened terrorists after all other efforts had failed. Indeed, proponents of torture argue that the assassination of terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden was possible only because of information obtained through enhanced interrogation techniques regarding his whereabouts.

President Barack Obama, who issued an executive order banning torture in 2009, opposes the use of torture. He disagrees that torture is the most effective means of interrogation in extreme cases. Obama also points out that allowing the use of torture has other harmful consequences. In addition to the suffering experienced by the detainee, it undermines the rule of law, alienates us from the rest of the world, and puts our own troops at risk for being tortured by enemy forces.

Where do you stand on the use of torture? If it could be shown that torture, in all likelihood, has prevented further terrorist attacks would you be in favor of it? Or do other harmful consequences, such as the effect on rule of law and

our standing with other nations, outweigh this consideration? On the other hand, is torture inherently wrong no matter how many lives it may save?

In this chapter we'll be studying utilitarian moral theory. We'll learn how to apply the principle of utility in developing and critiquing public policy as well as in making moral decisions in our own lives. Finally, we'll examine some of the strengths and the shortcomings of utilitarian theory.

Utilitarianism and the Principle of Utility

The Principles of Utilitarianism

Utilitarian ethics has had a profound influence during the past two centuries upon social reform and the shaping of public policy. Although there are various versions of utilitarianism, there are certain fundamental ideas common to all utilitarian theories. Most important, utilitarian theories are future looking or **consequentialist**—that is, the outcome or consequences of our actions are more important than our intentions.

Utilitarianism is oriented toward a particular goal: the greatest net happiness for all. Actions themselves are neither intrinsically right nor wrong. Instead, the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined solely by its consequences. If the consequences of a particular action or policy are, on the whole, beneficial and produce more good or happiness than harm, then that action or policy is morally acceptable. In other words, the ends justify the means.

The current debate regarding genetically modified (GM) food is driven in large part by utilitarian concerns of risk/benefit. For example, Bt corn (corn genetically engineered with a gene from a bacterium that produces a pesticide that kills the European corn borer) produces a great crop yield (benefit), which in turn contributes to the happiness of people—especially those who are currently undernourished because there is not enough food to go around. On the other hand, Bt corn may be toxic to monarch butterflies (risk). There may also be risks to humans that we are currently unaware of that we need to take into consideration in our risk/benefit analysis. The bottom line for utilitarians is, do the benefits of GM food, such as Bt corn, outweigh the risks?

According to utilitarians, the desire for happiness is universal, and humans intuitively recognize happiness as the greatest good. It is self-evident. While psychological egoists maintain that people are concerned only with their own interests or pleasures, most utilitarians believe that people are naturally sympathetic and concerned with promoting the happiness of others as well. This feeling of unity with our fellow creatures—what Chinese utilitarian Mo Tzu called “universal love”—is deeply rooted in our character. According to John Stuart Mill, the concern for universal happiness is so basic to the human character that a person “may be unable to conceive of the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good.”³ What counts is not just our happiness but the happiness of the whole community of **sentient beings**—that is, beings capable of feeling pleasure and pain.

Connections

What is the psychological egoist's view of human nature? See Chapter 7, pages 204–205.

The utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. . . . In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility.

—JOHN STUART MILL, *Utilitarianism* (1863)⁴

To the question, What is it that makes people happy? utilitarians respond that *pleasure* makes humans and other sentient beings happy. *Pain* and privation of pleasure, on the other hand, cause unhappiness. Actions that produce the most pleasure or happiness are good; those that promote pain are bad. The only intrinsic good is pleasure; the only intrinsic evil is pain.

Happiness, however, cannot be implied simply from preferences or a majority vote, because people's choices are not always well-informed. The majority, either because of ignorance about the nuances of an issue or because of irrational traditions and cultural norms, can be mistaken about the best action or the best social policy in terms of utility. Nor can sentiment alone provide a sufficient foundation for morality. British utilitarian Jeremy Bentham referred to unreflective sympathy as the "principle of caprice."⁵ Sentiments such as sympathy are often based merely on subjective feelings of approval and disapproval without any rational grounds to support those feelings.

What we need instead, utilitarians maintain, is a rational principle to guide people's moral choices. This principle is the *principle of utility*, or the **greatest happiness principle**. It states:

Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.⁶

Rather than simply relying upon our feelings of sympathy, utilitarians recommend that each person "test his particular feelings by reference to this general principle, and not the general principle by reference to his particular feeling."⁷ If an action conforms to the principle of utility, it is morally right; if not, it is morally wrong. The principle of utility also requires that we be impartial; each person who will be affected by our decision should get equal consideration.

While most philosophers believe that intentions are important when judging the morality of an action, for utilitarians the sole criterion is the action's consequences. For example, in the case of Kitty Genovese, it would not have mattered whether someone called the police because the noise of her screaming was keeping the caller awake or whether the caller's motive stemmed from a sense of duty to help those in distress. What counts is that, by making the phone call, Genovese would probably have been saved from further pain.

The utilitarian emphasis on the consequences of our actions (or lack of action) grounds it in reality rather than in abstract principles or subjective

Connections

What is the Kitty Genovese Syndrome? See Chapter 4, pages 123–125.

intentions. As such, utilitarian theory is an important corrective to the often-expressed excuses such as “I didn’t intend any harm” or “Don’t blame me; I’m not the one who did it.”

Utilitarians, however, do not deny that intentions and moral character are important. They realize that people with good intentions and a virtuous character are more likely to act in ways that benefit others. Utilitarians such as Mill wrote of the importance of cultivating our natural “feeling of unity with our fellow creatures,”⁸ what Australian utilitarian J. J. C. Smart refers to as an attitude of “generalized benevolence.”

Key Claims of Utilitarianism

- The desire for happiness is self-evident and universal.
- Pleasure brings about happiness; pain brings about unhappiness.
- People are naturally sympathetic and concerned with promoting the happiness of others.
- The rightness or wrongness of an action is determined solely by its consequences.
- An action is morally right to the extent that it promotes the happiness or pleasure of all those affected by it.
- An action is morally wrong to the extent that it increases unhappiness or pain.
- The moral community consists of all sentient beings.

Concern for All Sentient Beings

The utilitarian’s concern for the happiness of all sentient beings—regardless of their abilities, gender, social status, or even species—reflects the moral ideal of equality that was so important during the late eighteenth century. This ideal gave rise to both the American and French Revolutions. The utilitarians hoped that this moral ideal would someday be extended to all sentient beings—both human and nonhuman. Bentham wrote:

The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?⁹

The principle of utility, or greatest happiness principle, utilitarians maintain, is fundamental not only to human nature but to all moral theories throughout the world. The utilitarian philosophy of Mo Tzu, for example, developed as a challenge to Confucianism and Taoism. We’ll look at the utilitarianism of Mo Tzu later in this chapter. Buddhist ethics, although it places much more emphasis on character or virtue ethics, also contains a strong element of utilitarianism. In Buddhist ethics, *ahimsa*, or nonhurting, is regarded as an unchanging eternal law.



And what, monks, is Right View? It is, monks, the knowledge of suffering, the knowledge of the origin of suffering, the knowledge of the cessation of suffering, and the knowledge of the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering. This is called Right View.¹⁰

—BUDDHA, "The Four Noble Truths"

Rule-Utilitarianism and Act-Utilitarianism

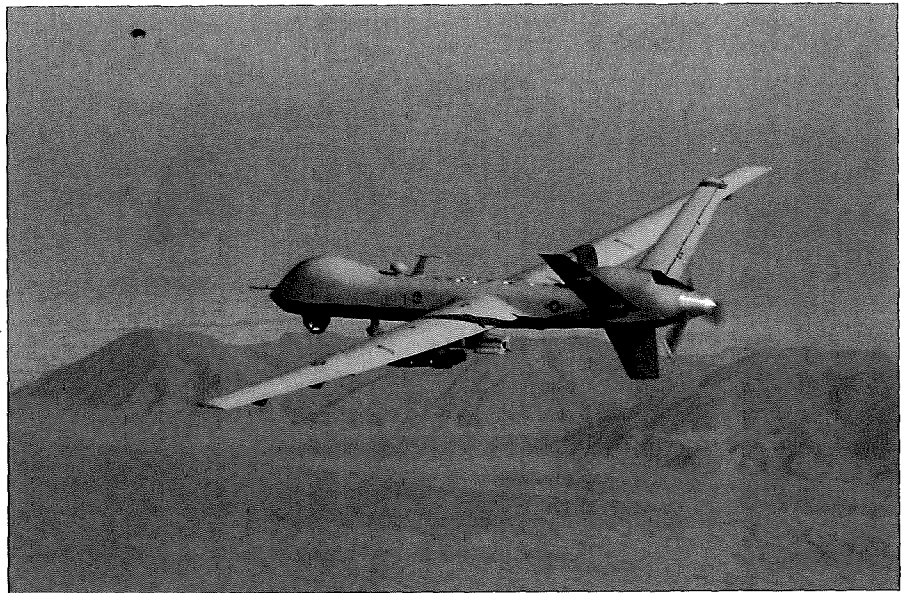
Utilitarian theory is sometimes broken down into act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism. This distinction is the creation of modern philosophers, not one recognized by either Bentham or Mill. *Rule-utilitarians* are concerned with the morality of particular classes of actions, such as torturing or stealing. They maintain that the morality of an action depends on the consequences of following a rule about that class of actions, such as "Do not steal." In other words, we should, in any particular situation, follow the rule that, in general, brings about the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Act-utilitarians are concerned only with the consequences of particular actions. No actions are inherently immoral. Universalizing moral rules against these actions fails to take into account that there may be situations, albeit rare, where lying, stealing, torturing, or assassination may be the best means to maximize happiness. Rather than following rules, the morality of each action should be judged on the basis of its utility rather than on the basis of general rules. Rule-utilitarians, in contrast, insist that we should follow a rule even when it is clear that, by doing so in a particular case, we will cause more pain than pleasure.

For example, in the use of torture on detainees who are suspected of terrorist activities, rule-utilitarians argue that we should obey the rule—the Geneva Convention and other laws—that prohibits torture, even if in a particular case we might gain valuable information through the use of torture. Act-utilitarians, on the other hand, argue that each case should be considered individually. If as a consequence of torturing a particular suspect, there is a reasonable probability that we might gain new information, such as the whereabouts of bin Laden, that could potentially save hundreds of lives, then we *ought* to use torture.

Because obedience to rules is more important than utility, rule-utilitarians are not considered true utilitarians by some modern philosophers. Instead, they are regarded as, to use the words of J. J. C. Smart, "rule worshippers." In response, rule-utilitarians acknowledge that adopting a policy of always following the rules may not maximize utility in a particular case, but in the long run, it is the best way to achieve the goals of utilitarianism.

Rule-utilitarians make an important point. There is not always time, nor the foreknowledge and skill, to calculate all the possible consequences of an action. Furthermore, much of our moral knowledge is passed down in the form of general



The United States has used unmanned drones to carry out assassinations—also known as “targeted killings”—in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia. The drone attacks have killed several high profile terrorist leaders, including American-born Anwar al-Awlaki. Hundreds of civilians have also been killed in these attacks.



Discussion Questions

1. Discuss how a rule-utilitarian and an act-utilitarian might each respond to the use of unmanned drones to carry out assassinations.
2. Defenders of the drone attacks argue that they have greatly weakened al-Qaeda. Opponents disagree, arguing that the strikes, which have killed innocent civilians and children, are a violation of basic human rights and, as such, have become a recruiting tool for al-Qaeda. Critically analyze both positions.

moral rules about the tendencies of certain classes of action to produce pleasure or pain. Therefore, following general rules can be expedient when we do not have time to calculate the resulting pain and pleasure of a particular action.



Exercises

1. In the past few decades, women have been applying to college at a significantly higher rate than men. To achieve gender balance, some liberal arts colleges are favoring male applicants, defending the practice on the grounds that colleges where there is gender equity are more attractive to students. Discuss whether this admissions policy is justifiable in light of utilitarian theory.

- *2. Discuss John Stuart Mill's claim that concern for our own happiness cannot be separated from a concern for the common good? Do you have a direct impulse to promote the common good? Or do you only promote the common good when it is in your best self-interest to do so? Relate your answer to your community service work.
3. Marijuana is the most frequently used illegal drug in the United States, with about 30 percent of college students saying they use it.¹¹ Should marijuana be legalized and, if so, under what circumstances? Support your answer citing research on the harms and benefits of marijuana and its legalization. Discuss how both an act-utilitarian and a rule-utilitarian would most likely approach this issue.
4. President Obama has banned the use of torture stating that America had "lost its moral bearings" in allowing torture to be used on detainees at Guantanamo Bay.¹² Former Vice President Dick Cheney disagrees. Cheney argues that the use of what he calls "harsh interrogation techniques" has been successful in extracting information from terrorist detainees to thwart future terrorist attacks. Is torture morally justified if it can prevent the death of hundreds of people as Cheney claims it has? Or is it always wrong as Obama argues? Support your answer. Discuss also how both an act-utilitarian and a rule-utilitarian might answer these questions.

Jeremy Bentham: Utilitarianism and Social Reform

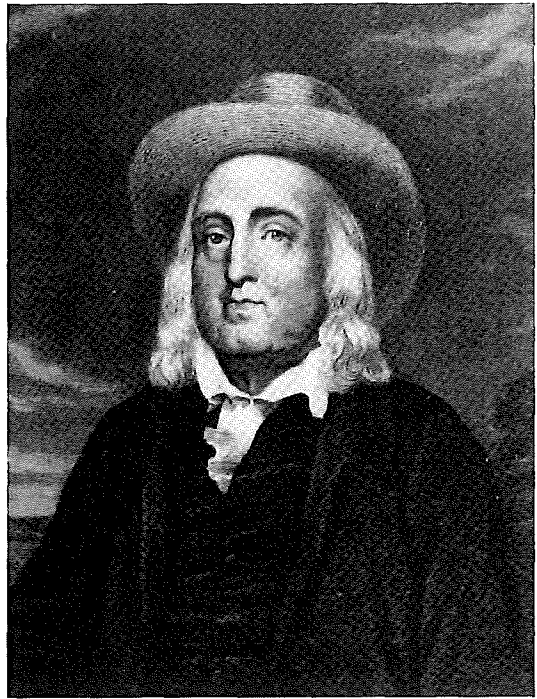
The interest of the community is one of the most general expressions that can occur in the phraseology of morals.

—JEREMY BENTHAM, *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), Ch. 1

English jurist, philosopher, and social reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) promoted utilitarianism primarily as a tool of social reform. Although a lawyer by training, Bentham never actually practiced law. However, he remained interested in jurisprudence and legal reform throughout his life. Bentham's philosophy was deeply imbued with the ideals of equality and democracy. In particular, he called into question the old moral values that favored the status quo and justified inequality as part of God's natural order. The Industrial Revolution, coupled with the widespread political unrest that culminated in the American and French Revolutions, brought about tremendous changes in Western society during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The sudden surge in population growth in Europe during the late eighteenth century and the rise of the factory system in the mid-nineteenth century precipitated a shift from an agricultural and commercial society to a modern industrial society. People from the countryside flocked into the new

*An asterisk indicates that the exercise is appropriate for students who are doing community service learning as part of the course.



*Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832),
English jurist, philosopher, and social
reformer.*

industrial centers in search of jobs and a better life. The introduction of new technologies and the mechanization of the means of production left the workers increasingly dependent on their employers. The increasing dependence of the workers, in turn, led to the advent of child labor, widespread poverty among the working class, and the creation of vast urban slums. Bentham developed his utilitarian theory in response to the flagrant injustices of his time and the desperate needs of the poor and exploited workers. See the selection from Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) at the end of this chapter.

Bentham's Utilitarian Theory

Bentham's moral theory was inspired in large part by the theories of Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.) and David Hume (1711–1776). Epicurus believed that pleasure and pain were the measure of good and evil and that happiness could be best achieved by living a tranquil, pain-free life surrounded by friends. Both Hume and Epicurus claimed that certain traits are virtues because of their utility, or usefulness in promoting happiness. Bentham took Hume's ethics one step further by arguing that utility provides the *only* source of political obligation for