

CLASSICAL UTILITARIANISM AND CONSEQUENTIALISM

The class of ethical positions identified in this chapter – *consequentialism* – is arguably the most popular normative orientation in contemporary ethical theory, although it has a very long and respectable history going as far back as ancient Greece. Two of the most famous proponents of consequentialist-style normative theory are the classical utilitarians Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). My presentation hereafter will focus primarily on their work, which I will use to build an elementary model for other kinds of consequentialist approach.

Consequentialism, in the broadest sense, is the view that what makes a choice morally good or bad is the set of consequences that follow from it. In other words, if a given choice leads to bad results, then the choice is morally wrong. If it leads to good results, then the choice is morally correct. As simple as it appears, however, any consequentialist theory must at some point develop a robust account of what constitutes a good or a bad result if it is to function as a reliable indicator of moral value. *Classical utilitarianism*, for example, depends on one central assumption about human motivation: human beings are primarily motivated by the desire to acquire pleasure or happiness and to avoid pain and suffering, for which reason our notions of good and bad ought to be measured against gaining pleasure and avoiding pain. As John Stuart Mill puts it in *Utilitarianism*,