



The Ethics of Happiness

Chapter 4 outlined the family of happiness-centered values like this:

HAPPINESS

The Ethics of Happiness challenges us to achieve the greatest balance of happiness (well-being, satisfaction, pleasure) over suffering. Include in the great calculation the happiness of others as well as oneself, and we find ourselves looking to achieve the greatest balance of happiness over suffering in society as a whole. Ethical thinking in this family of values is quantitative and economic, concerned with trade-offs and the distribution of goods, maximizing tangible social benefits.

Let us now explore the Ethics of Happiness in more detail.

HAPPINESS

A great deal of what we do is obviously not for its own sake but for the sake of something else. We go to the dentist, for instance, even though it's nobody's idea of a fun afternoon, to keep our teeth in shape. We fight the rush hour traffic to get home or to work, the pool or the grocery store.

Even these goals in turn don't seem "final," though. We don't really keep our teeth in shape for its own sake (come on, flossing?). And getting to work or the pool or the store—what's the point?

We know why: we want good jobs, healthy teeth and bodies, and some level of physical comfort and ease. But again, why do we want *these* things? These may not exactly be final goals either. But then, what is?

The natural answer is unsurprising, everyday, even "obvious" to many people. Our ultimate goal, we say, is to be happy. Happiness is the "final end" of human action. That is why we want everything else that we seek.

This is a strong claim—stronger than it might seem at first. It is actually a rough psychological theory: a systematic account of human motivation. More than anything else, we are saying, people seek happiness—and, correspondingly, in the end, what we try to avoid is unhappiness: pain and suffering. In terms of values, we value happiness as a basic and inclusive goal, and everything else is valued insofar as it serves happiness. What we disvalue, we disvalue in the end because it impedes or counteracts happiness.

THE QUESTION OF PLEASURE

We must be careful, however, to clarify the relation of this claim about happiness to the more specific and perhaps familiar claim that the final end of human action is specifically *pleasure*.

"Pleasure" usually suggests a more immediate kind of satisfaction or gratification, most often of the senses. It seems fairly clear, though, that people do all sorts of things that are not for the sake of pleasure in this sense. Almost every great endeavor, in art or politics or science or even family raising, let alone exploratory or military, tends to decrease, not increase, the net pleasure (in a strict sense, anyway) of the people who undertake them. Moreover, for this and other reasons the moral tradition tends to suspect that the pursuit of pleasure makes us grasping and self-centered. The gratification of the senses is important, obviously, but it is much less than the whole story.

Philosophers who nonetheless advocate a pleasure-based ethics therefore typically broaden their notion of "pleasure" in the direction of what we have been calling "happiness." There is no reason that all pleasures must be intense, they say, or just sensual, or that more such pleasures should be our primary goal. Though popularly the term "hedonist" tends to suggest a self-seeking and shallow person, notably preoccupied with sex and maybe a few other sensual gratifications, the ancient philosophical hedonists had (mostly) a bigger picture in mind. The Epicureans, for example (a Greek school of philosophy of the 3rd century BCE—not a kind of gourmet), actually recommended only the most modest pleasures. Epicurus himself, the founder and namesake, virtually advocated asceticism. The best way to be happy, he said, was to live a simple life and reduce pains as much as possible. We're not built to take too much intensity. For a sustainable life of pleasures—not blazing out too quickly and spending the rest of our lives unhappily regretting it—something fairly quiet is best.

Even when intense pleasure is sought and celebrated, there is not necessarily anything crude or shallow about it. The popular notion of hedonism, it might be argued, actually sells pleasure short. We get crude when we reduce sex, say, to nothing but the immediate release of tension. But if you get "crude" in this way, you also miss most of the pleasure itself. Sex involves the many pleasures of companionship and mutual appreciation, of touching and simple physical togetherness, of gracefulness and humor and spiritual

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connection too. The needs it can fulfill are not just passing and physical but go to the very core of our beings. That is the source of its deepest pleasures, and there is nothing crude or shallow about that.

If we are careful, then, we can continue to use the word "pleasure," in a broad sense, for the positive kinds of experience we picture as a basic, ultimately good thing, and the goal for which we seek most other things along the way. Or "happiness," if you prefer. That such a goal exists is the main thing, and, as we'll soon see, the starting point for a modern ethical philosophy.

READING

From Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience

MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI

IT IS TEMPTING to think of happiness as a static state of mind. The senses are being agreeably stimulated, no pain or distraction intrudes . . . we're feeling good. Psychological understandings, though, suggest that this is far too simple a picture. In fact, people can have all sorts of agreeable sense stimulation and still be desperately unhappy. Conversely, we can be in a great deal of pain or under stress and still be having the time of our lives. Happiness is not so simple.

Lionel Barrymore, of all people, once said that "Happiness is not a station you arrive at—it is the train you are riding on." There is a clue here. In his well-known work *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, the American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues that Barrymore is exactly right. Happiness lies in the flow of experience itself.

Indeed, Csikszentmihalyi uses the very term *flow* for "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it . . . for the sheer sake of doing it." We must be confronting a task, he says, that we have a chance of completing and that has clear goals and immediate feedback. We concentrate on it with "an effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life." Concern for the self disappears, and even our sense of time is altered: "hours can seem like minutes," yet at other times mere minutes seem endless. "The combination of all of these ele-

Pp. 1–4 from *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. © 1990 by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

ments causes a sense of deep enjoyment that is so rewarding people feel that expending a great deal of energy is worthwhile simply to be able to feel it." *That's happiness!*

Twenty-three hundred years ago Aristotle concluded that, more than anything else, men and women seek happiness. While happiness itself is sought for its own sake, every other goal—health, beauty, money, or power—is valued only because we expect that it will make us happy. Much has changed since Aristotle's time. Our understanding of the worlds of stars and of atoms has expanded beyond belief. The gods of the Greeks were like helpless children compared to humankind today and the powers we now wield. And yet on this most important issue very little has changed in the intervening centuries. We do not understand what happiness is any better than Aristotle did, and as for learning how to attain that blessed condition, one could argue that we have made no progress at all.

Despite the fact that we are now healthier and grow to be older, despite the fact that even the least affluent among us are surrounded by material luxuries undreamed of even a few decades ago (there were few bathrooms in the palace of the Sun King, chairs were rare even in the richest medieval houses, and no Roman emperor could turn on a TV set when he was bored), and regardless of all the stupendous scientific knowledge we can summon at will, people often end up feeling that their lives have been wasted, that instead of being filled with happiness their years were spent in anxiety and boredom.

Is this because it is the destiny of mankind to remain unfulfilled, each person always wanting more than he or she can have? Or is the pervasive malaise that often sours even our most precious moments the result of our seeking happiness in the wrong places? My intent is to use some of the tools of modern psychology to explore this very ancient question: When do people feel most happy? If we can begin to find an answer to it, perhaps we shall eventually be able to order life so that happiness will play a larger part in it.

Twenty-five years before I began to write these lines, I made a discovery that took all the intervening time for me to realize I had made. To call it a "discovery" is perhaps misleading, for people have been aware of it since the dawn of time. Yet the word is appropriate, because even though my finding itself was well known, it had not been described or theoretically explained by the relevant branch of scholarship, which in this case happens to be psychology. So I spent the next quarter-century investigating this elusive phenomenon.

What I "discovered" was that happiness is not something that happens. It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It

is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather, on how we interpret them. Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person. People who learn to control *inner experience* will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.

Yet we cannot reach happiness by consciously searching for it. "Ask yourself whether you are happy," said J. S. Mill, "and you cease to be so." It is by being fully involved with every detail of our lives, whether good or bad, that we find happiness, not by trying to look for it directly. Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist, summarized it beautifully in the preface to his book *Man's Search for Meaning*: "Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue . . . as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself."

So how can we reach this elusive goal that cannot be attained by a direct route? My studies of the past quarter-century have convinced me that there is a way. It is a circuitous path that begins with achieving control over the contents of our consciousness.

Our perceptions about our lives are the outcome of many forces that shape experience, each having an impact on whether we feel good or bad. Most of these forces are outside our control. There is not much we can do about our looks, our temperament, or our constitution. We cannot decide—at least so far—how tall we will grow, how smart we will get. We can choose neither parents nor time of birth, and it is not in your power or mine to decide whether there will be a war or a depression. The instructions contained in our genes, the pull of gravity, the pollen in the air, the historical period into which we are born—these and innumerable other conditions determine what we see, how we feel, what we do. It is not surprising that we should believe that our fate is primarily ordained by outside agencies.

Yet we have all experienced times when, instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we do feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fate. On the rare occasions that it happens, we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like.

This is what we mean by *optimal experience*. It is what the sailor holding a tight course feels when the wind whips through her hair, when the boat lunges through the waves like a colt—sails, hull, wind, and sea humming a harmony that vibrates in the sailor's veins. It is what a painter feels when the colors on the

canvas begin to set up a magnetic tension with each other, and a new *thing*, a living form, takes shape in front of the astonished creator. Or it is the feeling a father has when his child for the first time responds to his smile. Such events do not occur only when the external conditions are favorable, however: people who have survived concentration camps or who have lived through near-fatal physical dangers often recall that in the midst of their ordeal they experienced extraordinarily rich epiphanies in response to such simple events as hearing the song of a bird in the forest, completing a hard task, or sharing a crust of bread with a friend.

Contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times—although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we *make* happen. For a child, it could be placing with trembling fingers the last block on a tower she has built, higher than any she has built so far; for a swimmer, it could be trying to beat his own record; for a violinist, mastering an intricate musical passage. For each person there are thousands of opportunities, challenges to expand ourselves.

Such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur. The swimmer's muscles might have ached during his most memorable race, his lungs might have felt like exploding, and he might have been dizzy with fatigue—yet these could have been the best moments of his life. Getting control of life is never easy, and sometimes it can be definitely painful. But in the long run optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery—or perhaps better, a sense of *participation* in determining the content of life—that comes as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine.

UTILITARIANISM

Happiness is certainly *one* of our basic values. An entire family of values centers on such positive states of mind or flow: satisfaction, welfare, the relief of pain and suffering, and “pleasures” in many senses. These are good and worthy goals, as long as they don’t turn too shallow or self-centered. What we have here, so far, is an appealingly relaxed and inclusive family of values, like going home to a soft chair after spending a little too long in church with the person-centered in-laws.

The Ethics of Happiness, however, goes much further. In the hands of certain philosophers, the rather relaxed and rough-and-ready concern with happiness, as we have so far been sketching it, becomes something much more far-reaching: it actually becomes a theory of ethics. Indeed, it can become so systematic that the result, the theory or family of theories known as "utilitarian," pretty much defines what an ethical theory as such is now expected to look like and the questions it is expected to answer.

THE ARGUMENT BEGINS

Three basic steps, each of them arguably very plausible, lead us from our basic claims about happiness to a utilitarian ethical theory.

One step we have practically made already. We have said that happiness is one of the main ultimate aims of human action. In truth, though, isn't it *the* ultimate aim of human action? Don't we want *everything* else, in the end, for the sake of the happiness it brings or the suffering it avoids?

Remember that we are not defining "pleasure" or "happiness" in any crude or narrow sense. We are speaking generally of positive experiences, of positive states of mind, of flow. What else could we want but that? Happiness in this sense, then, is the "final end" of human action.

A second step also seems natural. If something is a good thing, more of it is pretty clearly better. Thus, in general, we should act in such a way as to produce the *most* happiness. Maximize happiness; minimize pain and suffering.

The claim is that this is just what any rational person already does. You may have to do some careful thinking, and even restrain yourself at times—giving up some short-term pleasure, for example, for longer-term gains. Maximizing happiness over a *life* does not mean that we will be happy every moment of that life.

Our strategy for happiness, in short, must become calculating. Even suffering can sometimes actually be a good thing in the long run. It may be painful to work hard, for instance, but we do it for the extra-pleasurable rewards that status or more money bring. You sweat in the sauna, uncomfortably, for the unmatched rush of pleasure that comes when you leap into the cold water afterward. The trick is to work in just enough adversity to maximize flow, or at least pleasure, later, without overdoing the pain. No point in sweating too long or working too hard or flossing more than you have to. But when a little pain now increases your net happiness in the long run, it's worth it.

THE STEP INTO ETHICS

One step remains. This step may also seem hardly more than a clarification of what we've been saying already, a more careful look at the nature of pleasure—but it turns out to make a dramatic claim.

The argument so far, strictly speaking, has been about our own individual happiness. But ethics, remember, asks us to take care for others as well as

ourselves. One reason that many ethical thinkers have mistrusted hedonism, indeed, is that it seems all too easy for a concern with one's own pleasure or happiness to remain self-centered and even careless of others.

Utilitarians, however, argue that happiness itself, properly understood, is social. Our concern with happiness does not stop at the boundaries of our own selves but *must* grow to encompass others. For one thing, quite simply, it is hard to be happy all alone. Our lives take on their emotional tone from the people around us. Moreover, we naturally seek the well-being of others close to us—spouses, children, parents, friends, lovers, students and teachers, those we work for and those who work for us. Anyone who knows love knows this simple fact. Often we also care for those who are distant, those whose plight or whose successes engage our sympathies or inspire us.

These are psychological, empirical claims: our own happiness is in fact bound up with the happiness of others. Beside them, some philosophers propose a more conceptual argument as well. We are beginning with the idea that happiness is the ultimate good thing. This claim in turn is based on a general claim about human beings (and perhaps some non-human beings as well). It's not just about me. From an ethical point of view, then, I cannot say that someone else's happiness is of no concern to me simply because I'm me, so to speak, and they're them. (Notice there's more than a shade of Kant here.) The conclusion is that happiness as such is a morally good thing, wherever it occurs—and it is good in the same way and to the same extent.

We are left, in short, with a commitment to the happiness of others beyond the self. And if happiness alone is the good, and if more of it is better and the most the best, then we have a commitment to achieve the *most* happiness we can in *society as a whole*. We have arrived at utilitarianism.

FOUNDERS

Two English thinkers advanced utilitarianism as a modern theory of ethics: Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873.)

Bentham started out as a social critic, concerned for more enlightened legislation, and was a lifelong opponent of the severe British penal codes of his time. It was Bentham who popularized the most famous version of utilitarianism: the formula of the *greatest good of the greatest number*. He called it the "Principle of Utility" in ethics—the formula that economists put as "Maximize Utility"—from which the term "utilitarianism" comes. (Technically modern utilitarians are a bit more careful: the *greatest good* is the goal, for sure, but it might not be of the *greatest number*—a question to which we'll return.)

"Good" for Bentham emphatically meant *pleasure*. Moreover, he thought pleasures could readily be quantified, and he tried to devise criteria for weighing pleasures directly against each other. Bentham actually imagined that we could one day solve ethical problems by sitting down with a calculator, figuring up the amounts of pleasure on either side!

Mill inherited the utilitarian project from Bentham and from his own father, James Mill. He gave it his own characteristic twists and developments, but on the key points he is one with them:

Pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; all desirable things . . . are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain. . . . Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.

And Mill insists that such an ethic appeals directly to our social nature.

The deeply rooted conception which every individual even now has of himself as a social being, tends to make him feel it one of his natural wants that there should be harmony between his feelings and those of his fellow creatures. . . . This feeling in most individuals is much inferior in strength to their selfish feelings, and is often wanting altogether. But to those who have it, it possesses all the characters of a natural feeling. It does not present itself to their minds as a superstition of education, or a law despotically imposed by the power of society. . . . This conviction is the ultimate sanction of the greatest happiness morality.

UTILITARIANISM IN PRACTICE: ECONOMIC THINKING

Solving ethical problems by quantifying pleasures turns out to be trickier than Bentham thought. For one thing, pleasure seems to be too subjective to measure in any accurate way, even when we are comparing our own pleasures with one another, certainly when we are trying to compare different people's. Happiness is probably even less quantifiable. Utilitarianism in practice has therefore moved toward a more economic way of thinking, looking at a more external (not so psychological) calculus of costs and benefits, and the more neutral and seemingly objective language of "utilities."

The logic, though, stays the same. When there are multiple choices with different utilities, or when utilities conflict, we should always pick the greatest one. Should you finish your degree now, say, even under financial and emotional hardship, or let it go and make things easier? Each choice has its specific benefits and its costs, and many can be at least partly quantified. In theory, the utilitarian answer is clear: choose a way that achieves the greatest net benefit—the highest total benefits over costs.

Social questions are to be decided the same way. We debate about assisted suicide, for example: about whether doctors should be allowed or expected to help people die if they so choose. Utilitarians would decide the question by looking at the effects on society as a whole. If assisted suicide would promote social utility, all told, then it should be allowed. If it doesn't, it shouldn't. What else (they would ask) could be relevant?

This looks like an empirical question. Maybe we can actually resolve it. The benefits of assisted suicide seem very concrete: relief of suffering—for dying

people, who are often in great physical pain and sometimes emotional pain too, unable to secure relief by themselves, and also for their families, who may suffer greatly too, emotionally and financially, when dying is prolonged and hard. The costs, by contrast, are much more indefinite and speculative, and do not necessarily have any effect on happiness. Some people may feel pressured into choosing assisted suicide, for example, and we might come somehow to “devalue life.” Put in the balance with the clear benefits, though, many utilitarians tend to think that these sorts of costs—such as they are—will be outweighed.

Sometimes utilitarians call on economics directly. Suppose that the question is whether to build a dam that will generate electricity and provide irrigation and recreation but will also cost money, displace families or towns, and flood valuable land. How do we decide? Naturally, say utilitarians, we try to quantify the various benefits and costs. How much social utility will be gained from the dam? How much will be lost?

As far as possible, economists calculate the answers in dollars. What will the dam cost? How much money will it take to compensate people who have to move? What is the monetary value of the land that will be lost? All of these costs must be weighed against the monetary value of the electricity produced, the dollar gain in food production due to irrigation, added income from recreation, and so on—as well as the net benefits that could be gained from doing something else with the same resources. More sophisticated calculations factor in the long-run probability of these benefits continuing (maybe high but less than 100 percent) and consider the costs when the dam’s useful life is over (dams eventually silt up and become useless). In the end, though, once again, the aim is still to answer a simple question: which choice has the highest net benefits?

Utilitarianism, then, draws attention squarely back to what is actually good or bad for people—to specific consequences for utilities, and behind them for what we suppose to be happiness—rather than to the sometimes abstract rules that too often (say utilitarians) are supposed to define what’s ethical. In this utilitarianism regards itself as no more than systematized common sense. *Do what has the best effects*—surely no one could disagree with so obvious a maxim!

READING

From Utilitarianism

JOHN STUART MILL

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend

to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded—namely, that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain . . .

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.

. . . When it is positively asserted to be impossible that human life should be happy, the assertion, if not something like a verbal quibble, is at least an exaggeration. If by happiness be meant a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement, it is evident enough that this is impossible. A state of exalted pleasure lasts only moments, or in some cases, and with some intermissions, hours or days, and is the occasional brilliant flash of enjoyment, not its permanent and steady flame. Of this the philosophers who have taught that happiness is the end [goal] of life were as fully aware as those who taunt them. The happiness which they meant was not a life of rapture; but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having

From John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chapter 2 (available in many editions, including online; I draw on http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john_stuart/m645u/).

as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing. A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name of happiness. And such an existence is even now the lot of many, during some considerable portion of their lives. The present wretched education, and wretched social arrangements, are the only real hindrance to its being attainable by almost all.

The objectors perhaps may doubt whether human beings, if taught to consider happiness as the end of life, would be satisfied with such a moderate share of it. But great numbers of mankind have been satisfied with much less. The main constituents of a satisfied life appear to be two, either of which by itself is often found sufficient for the purpose: tranquillity, and excitement. With much tranquillity, many find that they can be content with very little pleasure: with much excitement, many can reconcile themselves to a considerable quantity of pain. There is assuredly no inherent impossibility in enabling even the mass of mankind to unite both; since the two are so far from being incompatible that they are in natural alliance, the prolongation of either being a preparation for, and exciting a wish for, the other . . . When people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is, caring for nobody but themselves. To those who have neither public nor private affections, the excitements of life are much curtailed, and in any case dwindle in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be terminated by death: while those who leave after them objects of personal affection, and especially those who have also cultivated a fellow-feeling with the collective interests of mankind, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigour of youth and health. Next to selfishness, the principal cause which makes life unsatisfactory is want of mental cultivation. A cultivated mind—I do not mean that of a philosopher, but any mind to which the fountains of knowledge have been opened, and which has been taught, in any tolerable degree, to exercise its faculties—finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it; in the objects of nature, the achievements of art, the imaginations of poetry, the incidents of history, the ways of mankind, past and present, and their prospects in the future . . .

The deeply rooted conception which every individual even now has of himself as a social being, tends to make him feel it one of his natural wants that there should be harmony between his feelings and aims and those of his fellow creatures. If differences of opinion and of mental culture make it impossible for him to share many of their actual feelings—perhaps make him denounce and defy those feelings—he still needs to be conscious that his real aim

and theirs do not conflict; that he is not opposing himself to what they really wish for, namely their own good, but is, on the contrary, promoting it. This feeling in most individuals is much inferior in strength to their selfish feelings, and is often wanting altogether. But to those who have it, it possesses all the characters of a natural feeling. It does not present itself to their minds as a superstition of education, or a law despotically imposed by the power of society, but as an attribute which it would not be well for them to be without. This conviction is the ultimate sanction of the greatest happiness morality. This it is which makes any mind, of well-developed feelings, work with, and not against, the outward motives to care for others, afforded by what I have called the external sanctions; and when those sanctions are wanting, or act in an opposite direction, constitutes in itself a powerful internal binding force, in proportion to the sensitiveness and thoughtfulness of the character; since few but those whose mind is a moral blank, could bear to lay out their course of life on the plan of paying no regard to others except so far as their own private interest compels.

READING

"The Harm That Good Men Do"

BERTRAND RUSSELL

BERTRAND RUSSELL (1872–1970) was a 20th-century English philosopher who made his philosophical name working in logic and mathematics but who contributed to nearly every area of philosophy, including ethics, over his long life. He also was famous—or infamous—for regularly changing his mind. This essay, written during his utilitarian period, nicely counterpoints Mill's earnestness by setting out utilitarianism in an ironic and rhetorical fashion.

Notice that Russell appears to be attacking Bentham here, at least until he turns "serious" about halfway through, but in fact he is entirely on Bentham's side.

Russell's account of "respectable" or "traditional" morality may seem quaint and dated in some ways, even acknowledging that he's not exactly putting it sympathetically. Few moralists are so preoccupied with "bad language," or smoking, or going to church anymore. On the other hand, though, the underlying logic of the anti-utilitarian position on preventing venereal disease, as he lays it out, is exactly the same as the logic used today by some opponents of sex education and birth control. Society has moved toward a more utilitarian perspective since Russell wrote this essay, but by no means has everyone gone all the way.

A hundred years ago there lived a philosopher named Jeremy Bentham, who was universally recognized to be a very wicked man. I remember to this day the first time that I came across his name when I was a boy. It was in a statement by the Rev. Sydney Smith to the effect that Bentham thought people ought to make soup of their dead grandmothers. This practice appeared to me as undesirable from a culinary as from a moral point of view, and I therefore conceived a bad opinion of Bentham. Long afterwards, I discovered that the statement was one of those reckless lies in which respectable people are wont to indulge in the interests of virtue. I also discovered what was the really serious charge against him. It was no less than this: that he defined a "good" man as a man who does good. This definition, as the reader will perceive at once if he is right-minded, is subversive of all true morality. How much more exalted is the attitude of Kant, who lays it down that a kind action is not virtuous if it springs from affection for the beneficiary, but only if it is inspired by the moral law, which is, of course, just as likely to inspire unkind actions. We know that the exercise of virtue should be its own reward, and it seems to follow that the enduring of it on the part of the patient should be its own punishment. Kant, therefore, is a more sublime moralist than Bentham, and has the suffrage of all those who tell us that they love virtue for its own sake.

It is true that Bentham fulfilled his own definition of a good man: he did much good. The forty middle years of the nineteenth century in England were years of incredibly rapid progress, materially, intellectually, and morally. At the beginning of the period comes the Reform Act, which made Parliament representative of the middle-class, not, as before, of the aristocracy. This Act was the most difficult of the steps towards democracy in England, and was quickly followed by other important reforms, such as the abolition of slavery in Jamaica. At the beginning of the period the penalty for petty theft was death by hanging; very soon the death penalty was confined to those who were guilty of murder or high treason. The

Corn Laws, which made food so dear as to cause atrocious poverty, were abolished in 1846. Compulsory education was introduced in 1870. It is the fashion to decry the Victorians, but I wish our age had half as good a record as theirs. This, however, is beside the point. My point is that a very large proportion of the progress during those years must be attributed to the influence of Bentham. There can be no doubt that nine-tenths of the people living in England in the latter part of last century were happier than they would have been if he had never lived. So shallow was his philosophy that he would have regarded this as a vindication of his activities. We, in our more enlightened age, can see that such a view is preposterous; but it may fortify us to review the grounds for rejecting a grovelling utilitarianism such as that of Bentham.

We all know what we mean by a "good" man. The ideally good man does not drink or smoke, avoids bad language, converses in the presence of men only exactly as he would if there were ladies present, attends church regularly, and holds the correct opinions on all subjects. He has a wholesome horror of wrongdoing, and realizes that it is our painful duty to castigate Sin. He has a still greater horror of wrong thinking, and considers it the business of the authorities to safeguard the young against those who question the wisdom of the views generally accepted by middle-aged successful citizens. Apart from his professional duties, at which he is assiduous, he spends much time in good works: he may encourage patriotism and military training; he may promote industry, sobriety, and virtue among wage-earners and their children by seeing to it that failures in these respects receive due punishment; he may be a trustee of a university and prevent an ill-judged respect for learning from allowing the employment of professors with subversive ideas. Above all, of course, his "morals," in the narrow sense, must be irreproachable.

It may be doubted whether a "good" man, in the above sense, does, on the average, any more good than a "bad" man. I mean by a "bad" man the contrary of what we have been describing. A "bad" man is one who is known to smoke and to drink occasionally, and even to say a bad word when someone treads on his toe. His conversation is not always such as could be printed, and he sometimes spends fine Sundays out-of-doors instead of at church. Some of his opinions are subversive; for instance, he may think that if you desire peace you should prepare for peace, not for war. Toward wrongdoing he takes a scientific attitude such as he would take towards his motor-car if it misbehaved; he argues that sermons and prison will no more cure vice than mend a broken tire. In the matter of wrong thinking he is even more perverse. He maintains that what is called

"wrong thinking" is simply thinking, and what is called "right thinking" is repeating words like a parrot; this gives him a sympathy with all sorts of undesirable cranks. His activities outside his working hours may consist merely in enjoyment, or, worse still, in stirring up discontent with preventable evils which do not interfere with the comfort of the men in power. And it is even possible that in the matter of "morals" he may not conceal his lapses as carefully as a truly virtuous man would do, defending himself by the perverse contention that it is better to be honest than to pretend to set a good example. A man who fails in any or several of these respects will be thought ill of by the average respectable citizen, and will not be allowed to hold any position conferring authority, such as that of a judge, a magistrate, or a schoolmaster. Such positions are open only to "good" men. . . .

Consider, again, such a matter as venereal disease: it is known that this can be almost entirely prevented by suitable precautions taken in advance, but owing to the activities of good men this knowledge is disseminated as little as possible, and all kinds of obstacles are placed in the way of its utilization. Consequently sin still secures its "natural" punishment, and the children are still punished for the sins of the fathers, in accordance with Biblical precept. How dreadful it would be if this were otherwise, for, if sin were no longer punished, there might be people so abandoned as to pretend that it was no longer sin, and if the punishment did not fall also upon the innocent, it would not seem so dreadful. How grateful we ought to be, therefore, to those good men who ensure that the stern laws of retribution decreed by Nature during our days of ignorance can still be made to operate in spite of the impious knowledge rashly acquired by scientists. All right-thinking people know that a bad act is bad quite regardless of the question whether it causes any suffering or not, but since men are not all capable of being guided by the pure moral law, it is highly desirable that suffering should follow from sin in order to secure virtue. Men must be kept in ignorance of all ways of escaping the penalties which were incurred by sinful actions in pre-scientific ages. I shudder when I think how much we should all know about the preservation of mental and physical health if it were not for the protection against this dangerous knowledge which our good men so kindly provide.

To speak seriously: the standards of "goodness" which are generally recognized by public opinion are not those which are calculated to make the world a happier place. This is due to a variety of causes, of which the chief is tradition, and the next most powerful is the unjust power of dominant classes. Primitive morality seems to have

developed out of the notion of taboo; that is to say, it was originally purely superstitious, and forbade certain perfectly harmless acts (such as eating out of the chief's dish) on the supposed ground that they produced disaster by magical means. In this way there came to be prohibitions, which continued to have authority over people's feelings when the supposed reasons for them were forgotten. A considerable part of current morals is still of this sort: certain kinds of conduct produce emotions of horror, quite regardless of the question whether they have bad effects or not. In many cases the conduct which inspires horror is in fact harmful; if this were not the case, the need for a revision of our moral standards would be more generally recognized. Murder, for example, can obviously not be tolerated in a civilized society; yet the origin of the prohibition of murder is purely superstitious. It was thought that the murdered man's blood (or, later, his ghost) demanded vengeance, and might punish not only the guilty man, but any one who showed him kindness. The superstitious character of the prohibition of murder is shown by the fact that it was possible to be purified from blood-guiltiness by certain ritual ceremonies, which were apparently designed, originally, to disguise the murderer so that the ghost would not recognize him. This, at least, is the theory of Sir J. G. Frazer. When we speak of repentance as "washing out" guilt we are using a metaphor derived from the fact that long ago actual washing was used to remove blood-stains. Such notions as "guilt" and "sin" have an emotional background connected with this source in remote antiquity. Even in the case of murder a rational ethic will view the matter differently: it will be concerned with prevention and cure, as in the case of illness, rather than with guilt, punishment, and expiation.

Our current ethic is a curious mixture of superstition and rationalism. Murder is an ancient crime, and we view it through a mist of age-long horror. Forgery is a modern crime, and we view it rationally. We punish forgers, but we do not feel them strange beings set apart, as we do murderers. And we still think in social practice, whatever we may hold in theory, that virtue consists in not doing rather than in doing. The man who abstains from certain acts labelled "sin" is a good man, even though he never does anything to further the welfare of others. This, of course, is not the attitude inculcated in the Gospels: "Love thy neighbour as thyself" is a positive precept. But in all Christian communities the man who obeys this precept is persecuted, suffering at least poverty, usually imprisonment, and sometimes death. The world is full of injustice, and those who profit by injustice are in a position to administer rewards and punishments. The rewards go to those who invent ingenious justifications for inequality, the punishments to those who try to

remedy it. I do not know of any country where a man who has a genuine love for his neighbour can long avoid obloquy.

Those who defend traditional morality will sometimes admit that it is not perfect, but contend that any criticism will make all morality crumble. This will not be the case if the criticism is based upon something positive and constructive, but only if it is conducted with a view to nothing more than momentary pleasure. To return to Bentham: he advocated, as the basis of morals, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." A man who acts upon this principle will have a much more arduous life than a man who merely obeys conventional precepts. He will necessarily make himself the champion of the oppressed, and so incur the enmity of the great. He will proclaim facts which the powers that be wish to conceal; he will deny falsehoods designed to alienate sympathy from those who need it. Such a mode of life does not lead to a collapse of genuine morality. Official morality has always been oppressive and negative: it has said "thou shalt not," and has not troubled to investigate the effect of activities not forbidden by the code. Against this kind of morality all the great mystics and religious teachers have protested in vain: their followers ignored their most explicit pronouncements. It seems unlikely, therefore, that any large-scale improvements will come through their methods.

More is to be hoped, I think, from the progress of reason and science. Gradually men will come to realize that a world whose institutions are based upon hatred and injustice is not the one most likely to produce happiness. . . . We need a morality based upon love of life, upon pleasure in growth and positive achievement, not upon repression and prohibition. A man should be regarded as "good" if he is happy, expansive, generous, and glad when others are happy; if so, a few peccadilloes should be regarded as of little importance.

CAN UTILITY BE THE SINGLE MEASURE OF VALUES?

The utilitarian theory of ethics is compelling in its way and surely must find some place in our moral thinking. However we theorize it, happiness and the means to happiness are among our prime values. Sometimes at least, we must calculate and weigh different benefits and costs, and different benefits and costs to different people, under conditions of scarcity. Hard choices are necessary, but there are rational ways to make them.

But there are also questions and problems, and some serious objections, once utilitarianism pushes beyond these modest claims. Here we must enter, at least a little, the debate over utilitarianism as an ethical theory.

UTILITY AS THE SINGLE MEASURE OF VALUES

One of the main motives for ethical theory is simplification: finding some sort of order and unity in what might seem to be a hodgepodge of different values, both for intellectual elegance and to make it easier to decide what to do in the end. From this point of view, even four families of values are three too many. Ideally—so theorists say—we need just one.

Utilitarians argue that ultimately all values reduce to benefits and costs. All ethical thinking, and all ethical conflict, they say, is really about one thing—what will truly achieve the greatest happiness of all, all things considered and in the long run. And so, utilitarians say, we are justified in *translating* all other values into benefit-and-cost terms—“cashing them out,” so to speak. Happiness becomes utilitarianism’s single measure for all moral thinking.

Think of assisted suicide again, or the dam-building example. In the last section we discussed these issues briefly from a utilitarian point of view. On the face of it, though, there are also nonutilitarian values involved. Issues of justice and rights, for example: justice to people whose land the dams might flood, say—maybe long time owners who have cherished this one place on Earth—or people’s rights to choose to die, even if it doesn’t serve the “greatest good.”

But: couldn’t these values be understood in terms of happiness, a calculus of benefits and costs? Certainly justice, say, promotes happiness much of the time. Indirectly, it also promotes social stability, which in turn leads to happiness. An unjust social order—unfair, unequal, arbitrary—would make a lot of people unhappy much of the time, and it would also be prone to resistance and overthrow, leading to even more uncertainty and unrest. It’s not a picture that looks too satisfying.

Mill explicitly grounded justice on utility:

Justice is a name for certain classes of moral rules which concern the essentials of human well-being more nearly, and are therefore of moral absolute obligation, than any other rules for the guidance of life. . . . [T]hey are the main element in determining the social feelings of mankind. It is their observance which alone preserves peace among human beings.

We should indeed promote justice, then, but not ultimately for its own sake. We should promote it because it helps maximize utility. It serves the social good.

Utilitarians would go on to argue that while justice is *usually* a good thing, it is not *always* a good thing. In fact, it is not a good thing if it irresolvably conflicts with social utility. In an emergency, for example, we sometimes cut corners—even violate some people’s rights—for the sake of saving greater social goods. Mill again:

[C]ases may occur in which some other social duty is so important as to over-rule . . . the general maxims of justice. Thus, to save a life, it may not only be

allowable, but a duty, to steal or take by force the necessary food or medicine, or to kidnap and compel to officiate the only qualified medical practitioner.

So even stealing or kidnapping doctors might be morally acceptable, or even a duty, in a pinch! Strong stuff—but not necessarily implausible, and perfectly natural if you are a utilitarian. In a system where utility rules, every other value must eventually pass utility's muster.

Utilitarians would say the same of the virtues. No character trait, they argue, is simply good by itself. Rather, good traits are good because they promote utility. Take honesty, for example. It might seem that dishonesty often has major benefits. Little (or not so little) deceptions can keep you ahead of the crowd and out of trouble. But deception also has costs and dangers. It takes a lot of work. It's emotionally draining to have your guard up all the time. Besides, when the deceptions fail, as they often will, you may lose your friends. Thus, arguably, dishonesty is a bad idea, even on utilitarian grounds. It is not a matter of benefits to you being trumped by some more abstract kind of value, but simply of thinking more carefully about the tangible costs in the long run.

Some people think that no deception can ever be ethical and propose to tell the truth even to criminals who threaten you and to children too young to understand. But it is not at all clear that this kind of "hyper-truthfulness" has positive overall effects. Surely, at least in this case, most of us will say that here is where the value of honesty ends: when it really does have bad consequences, all things considered. Here, in short, the utilitarian "single measure" becomes the *judge* of other values. Those moral values that don't "cash out" in terms of utility are not really moral values after all.

DOES UTILITARIANISM GO TOO FAR?

As you might imagine, though, these utilitarian moves are controversial. Critics argue that while utility and utilitarian considerations are indeed important, they cannot be the whole story.

First of all, is it really true that justice, say, is only good so far as it serves social utility? Certainly our legal system doesn't think so. Everyone is entitled to a fair trial and to be presumed innocent, even though he or she may turn out to be guilty. It might be much more satisfying, not to mention cheaper, simply to put away a whole class of criminal suspects without any trial at all. Yet we will not stand for it. Ethically as well as legally, it is not *right*—not just, not fair, not respectful of persons.

Utilitarians do try to defend many important rights. Rights to free speech, liberty, and all the rest serve social utility. They maximize the general happiness—usually. When they don't, though, utilitarians can only conclude that there are no such rights. Mill, again, even endorses kidnapping doctors under some (extreme) circumstances. But what good is a utilitarian kind of

"right," critics say, if the moment social needs conflict with them, utilitarianism no longer stands behind them? The whole point of rights is to stop this kind of thinking—taking a person as a mere means to some social good—dead in its tracks.

We may be no happier with utilitarianism's treatment of the virtues. Can pleasure (or "utility" in *any* guise) really be the ethical bottom line? Aren't some pleasures just wrong, however pleasurable they may be? And not wrong because they lead to greater displeasure somewhere down the line, but just plain *wrong*—wrong because we should not take pleasure from such things in the first place.

Mill vacillated on this point, speaking at times of "higher" and "lower" pleasures. "Higher" pleasures are supposed to be better—worthier of human beings. "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." But it is not at all clear why. If pleasure alone is the good, how can one of two equally pleasurable pleasures still be "better"? It appears that Mill himself wants to introduce some nonutilitarian factors into the mix—a sensible move, for sure, but no credit to utilitarianism.

THE PROBLEM OF MEASUREMENT

If utility is to be the single measure of values, it must also, obviously, be a *measure* of values. It must offer a usable and concretely applicable way to think. Some critics of utilitarianism argue, however, that "happiness" and "utility" are such vague terms that we cannot really "measure" or "weigh" the relative utilities of different courses of action. Seldom am I even sure about what would make *me* happiest, for instance, let alone other people—or how to compare my happiness to theirs, or even my own specific happinesses to each other. Meanwhile, the ripple effects of even the simplest act are almost incalculable, all the more so if it affects large numbers of people.

Should I spend my vacation at the beach or helping build houses with Habitat for Humanity? I would probably enjoy the beach more, though I do like to build and to help out too. Building houses would help make the future occupants happier, though the houses will get built anyway, just about as well whether I am there or not. Is there any precise way to weigh a sharp and immediate pleasure for me—one person—against the smaller and less definite contribution I might make to the quite different and longer-term happiness of others? And even this is barely the beginning. If I go on the Habitat trip, someone else will not go: perhaps the trip would be better for them than for me? Or maybe *they* would up the total happiness more by going to the beach? (Or somewhere else?) Who are they, anyway? And how do I weigh in the possible benefits to others (my students, say, or my family) from my being somewhat better rested after the beach? What about my long-run contribution to beach erosion and the commercial overdevelopment of fragile coast ecologies?

Despite its appearance of hardheaded practicality then, utilitarianism may actually be useless, or worse, as a practical way to make decisions. What really happens in such cases, critics worry, is that utilitarian language lends itself too readily to offhand self-justification. Whatever I do, I can justify myself by pointing to the happiness I (might) produce or costs I (might) avoid. Just this accusation has been leveled against the monetary calculation of "costs" and "benefits," for example, as in the dam project. All the numbers look very rational and impartial and responsible, but underneath it's all really guesswork, say the critics, dressed up to justify whatever the decision maker is inclined to do anyway.

CONCLUSIONS

You can see that these are controversial matters. My proposed conclusion—itsself debatable, of course!—is that utilitarianism is a limited tool. It systematizes *some* of our moral values and can help resolve *some* conflicts of moral values, especially conflicts between fairly specific utilities. These are genuine and important uses.

Utilitarianism also has some edgy implications very much worth exploring, such as serious consideration for other animals, whose pains and sufferings are sometimes as great or greater than ours but who have traditionally been ignored in ethical thinking entirely. Some modern utilitarians campaign strongly for "animal liberation." Other implications may also be radical. Jeremy Bentham, as I've mentioned, was best known as a prison and criminal law reformer, and one could argue, as Russell does, that we still have not learned his lessons. From a utilitarian point of view, the point of punishment is not to exact revenge or retribution somehow, but to serve the social good, which seems to suggest a more restorative and less punitive approach to crime than we continue to practice today.

Still, arguably, utilitarianism is not the whole story, or even close. There are many other moral values that need to be understood in their own rights, as we have tried to do with the values of the person and will continue in the next two chapters. Much as we might want everything simple and neat, the moral world may not cooperate. And perhaps we should even be glad of that.

FOR REVIEW

1. How could it be argued that pleasure or happiness is our ultimate goal?
2. What exactly is happiness, in the utilitarian view?

3. What is "flow"? How does it relate to happiness?
4. How does utilitarianism become an ethic?
5. Who were Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill?
6. What is "the harm that good men do"?
7. How do utilitarians argue that utility is the single measure of all values?
8. Why do critics argue that there is no single measure of all values?
9. What are some important uses of utilitarian thinking, according to the text?
10. What are some important limits of utilitarian thinking, according to the text?



EXERCISES AND NOTES

6.1 IS HAPPINESS OUR FINAL GOAL?

Hedonists believe that pleasure or happiness is the chief and indeed only ultimate human end. How might they deal with people who pretty clearly seek something other than happiness, or even seek things that are guaranteed to produce *unhappiness*: people who give their lives in battle, say, or willingly undergo great suffering to achieve something magnificent or uncertain? You could stretch and say that in some metaphysical or unusual sense they're "happy," but this is not true, really, if they're in great pain, or never see the fruits of their labors, or die in the pursuit. Yet these may still be morally admirable things to do.

Even without a moral mission we sometimes seek things that are guaranteed to produce unhappiness. Indeed, if you look around the world today, you do not find that people in general are very happy. Wealthy countries seem to be even less happy than poor ones. We are now spectacularly richer and more technologically accomplished than anyone could even have dreamed for most of human history, but at the same time suicide and depression are epidemic and massive numbers of people need medication just to get through their day.

How can this be? Why do we so reliably produce our own unhappiness? Is the answer that we really don't understand happiness? Or that we don't understand what we are doing? But how could *that* be? Happiness is supposed to be our prime concern . . .

6.2 UTILITARIAN NIRVANA?

Suppose that it becomes possible to set up a grand virtual-reality "experience-machine" that creates for you any kind of experience you choose. For the rest

of your life you could be plugged into a fantasy world, tailor-made to make you delirious with pleasure, riding the biggest surf in the world, or heroically saving the galaxy from evil invaders, or playing Rachmaninoff while conducting the New York Philharmonic from the keyboard, or whatever else your fantasy might be (filling in the blanks is a fun part). You'd never know that really you are just lying on a bed somewhere, kept alive by IV and a few doctors, your head wired to a monitor. *But what's the difference, if happiness is the only thing that counts?*

This is a famous philosophical thought experiment meant to challenge hedonistic utilitarianism. Like the questions just raised about unhappiness and the modern world, it is not merely hypothetical, either. Americans currently watch 250 billion hours of TV a year. (Yup! that's 250 billion.) The average elementary-school child watches four hours a day. (And you?) Is this so very different? If this kind of experience-machine makes you uneasy, shouldn't TV make you uneasy too? If you say in either case that we ought not to be settling for such paltry substitutes for the real world, what kinds of moral values are you appealing to?

6.3 MORE QUESTIONS

Can utilitarianism take better account of justice and fairness? How? Should it try? What do you think of Mill's endorsement of kidnapping doctors? Are there any real-world analogues to this? How about torturing someone to extract information that might save a lot of lives?

On the utilitarian view, the pleasures of a sadist are not bad in themselves. No pleasure can be bad in itself, remember, since pleasure just *is* the good. Rather, as with everything else on the utilitarian view, the pleasures of the sadist are supposed to be bad because of their effects: more unhappiness for other people than the sadist gains for himself or herself. So, could sadistic pleasure be OK (in fact, be good) if no one else were harmed by it (for example, if it were only "virtual," with no likelihood of spilling over into actual harm to others)?

Or, what if a sadist had an enormous capacity for pleasure, so that his or her pleasures actually exceeded the suffering of all those who were harmed? Would sadism be a good thing then? Is this what utilitarianism implies? Ought we be able to criticize some pleasures or happinesses themselves?

A further problem, illustrated by this last case, is the problem hinted at in the text with Bentham's formula of the "Greatest good of the greatest number." Utilitarianism wants to promote the greatest net happiness in society as a whole, but it does not follow that this happiness must be equitably distributed, so that the "greatest good" could only come from happiness being as widely shared as possible (i.e., distributed to the "greatest number"). The greatest good might also come from making a few people *very* much happier while causing harm to the greater number, but just enough less harm in total that there is still a net gain overall. This would be troubling from the point of view of justice, to say the least.

The last exercise in Chapter 6 raised the question of animals in the context of the Ethics of the Person. How do you think utilitarianism might address the same question? Some hints: first, consider the question of who or what kind of beings utilitarian ethics applies to, and why. Then consider the question of animal pain and suffering, which of course is front and center in utilitarian ethics. (There is a relevant discussion of moral vegetarianism in chapter 16, by the way.) Finally, consider some implications and complications. If animals count, or some animals count, under utilitarianism, must they or should they count in the same way as humans? To the same extent? Why or why not?

NOTES

Bertrand Russell's essay "The Harm That Good Men Do" is excerpted from a longer piece of the same title in his book *Sceptical Essays* (Unwin Paperbacks, 1977), pp. 84–92. One note: Russell's remark about "good" men "preventing an ill-judged respect for learning from allowing the employment of professors with subversive ideas" is not just ironic: it refers to an incident in his own life. A world-renowned scholar by 1940, Russell was offered a professorship by the City College of New York only to have the offer rescinded after a massive, politically orchestrated outcry against him because he was something of a sexual freethinker for his time—supporting trial marriage, for example. Such things no longer happen, of course.

The Australian philosopher Peter Singer is today's most prominent utilitarian; you'll meet him momentarily in the "Using Your Tools" exercise to follow. A readable and provocative application of utilitarianism to a range of contemporary issues is his *Practical Ethics* (3rd edition, Cambridge University Press, 2011). On animals specifically, see also his *Animal Liberation* (many editions).

The "Ethics Updates" website has a wide range of links to utilitarian texts and other philosophical resources: go to <http://ethics.sandiego.edu/theories> and then to the "Utilitarianism" link. Dan Brock's essay "Utilitarianism," in Tom Regan and Don Vandeveer, eds., *And Justice for All: New Introductory Essays in Philosophy and Public Policy* (Rowman and Allenheld, 1982), is an excellent though dense guide to philosophical utilitarianism as well as some of the critical issues hinted at here. Classic is J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams's little book *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge University Press, 1983.)



USING YOUR TOOLS #3

A UTILITARIAN APPROACH TO POVERTY

The Australian philosopher Peter Singer is today's best-known and most controversial utilitarian. His application of utilitarianism to the question of our relation to animals, in his book *Animal Liberation*, originally published in 1975, is considered one of the touchstones of the modern "animal rights" movement (though like all utilitarians, he does not argue for rights per se). He has also written widely and controversially on many bioethical topics.

Singer also brings utilitarianism to bear on the question of world poverty. In several academic essays and books, along with a widely read *New York Times Magazine* piece called "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," he argues that the solution is quite simple, though also, it seems, radical. It is for well-off people to give large portions of their income to provide for the basic needs of poor people around the world. Singer backs up this claim with a moral argument that is also extremely simple—but, it seems, irresistible.

Most of us in well-off countries spend large chunks of our incomes on things that we do not really need: regularly eating expensive restaurant food, for example, rather than perfectly nutritious but simple and inexpensive fare. For millions of people in the world, however—including millions of children, just to make the picture sharper—even a tiny fraction of that money could make the difference between life and death. Any plausible ethic, Singer would say, and certainly and obviously utilitarianism, must conclude that we should give as much as we can of our income to help alleviate world hunger and readily treated diseases that kill or disable millions of children a year in other parts of the world.

Singer is incontestably right about the data. Right now the average American family spends at least a third of its income on relatively indulgent things like eating out, buying new clothes or shoes, or even cars, just because the old ones have gone out of style, and taking vacations in distant and luxurious places, or driving to Disneyland or the Yellowstone in the summers. These things, necessary as they may get to seem to us, look like "needs" only to the affluent. Most of the world's population gets on quite well without them. Many would consider them unimaginable luxuries. Depending on what you count as necessities, the proportion of income spent on non-necessities could actually be considered much higher. It's clear in any case, though, that much of our income is spent on things not essential to the preservation of our lives and health.

Others, meantime, are in desperate need. According to Oxfam International (<http://www.oxfamamerica.org/whatyoucando/donate>, accessed 12/22/11), 840 million people go hungry each year. Over a billion people live on less than \$1 a day. Twelve million people die each year just from a lack of water. Over 30,000 children under the age of five die *each day* due to hunger and other preventable causes.

For people in such straits, aid of even a few dollars might mean the difference between life and death. The simplest food would be enough—the sort of thing you'd never see in a

fancy restaurant, unadorned and sparse perhaps, but sufficient for the revival of strength and work for a better day. Medicines—the simplest and cheapest of antibiotics or water purification, for example, which for pennies per child could eliminate the diarrhea that kills two million children in the developing world every year. Education—basic female literacy, for starters, at the cost of a few teachers and teaching materials, the single most significant factor in empowering women, reducing birth rates, and promoting economic growth in poor countries.

It is clear to utilitarians—and surely, not just to them—that this is a morally unjustifiable situation. The same money that keeps us stylish or entertained or expensively fed, often with little or no gain to our real well-being, could do vastly more good if given instead to charities that aid the poor in developing countries as well as here at home. No elaborate or exact scale is needed to see this. It's life or death on one hand, and only passing pleasure, at best, on the other hand—on ours. Therefore, we are morally obliged to give a large portion of our income to provide basic goods to people around the world who desperately need them.

THE CASE OF BOB'S BUGATTI

Singer draws on another utilitarian philosopher, Peter Unger, to lay out several analogies that help make the logic of the argument clear. One is the case of a man named Bob and his rare and precious old car. Imagine that Bob is almost ready to retire, and he has invested his entire savings in a very valuable antique car—a Bugatti. Unfortunately he has not been able to insure it, but he tends to it very carefully. He loves driving and caring for the Bugatti, and he also knows that he will always be able to sell the car in the future, should he need to, and live very well on the proceeds.

One day, however, when Bob is out for a drive,

he parks the Bugatti near the end of a railway siding and goes for a walk up the track. As he does so, he sees that a runaway train, with no one aboard, is running down the railway track. Looking farther down the track, he sees the small figure of a child very likely to be killed by the runaway train. He can't stop the train and the child is too far away to warn of the danger, but he can throw a switch that will divert the train down the siding where his Bugatti is parked. Then nobody will be killed—but the train will destroy his Bugatti. Thinking of his joy in owning the car and the financial security it represents, Bob decides not to throw the switch. The child is killed. For many years to come, Bob enjoys owning his Bugatti and the financial security it represents.

So what do you think of Bob's action? What would you have done in his situation? Most of us, Singer suggests, would consider that what Bob did was wrong. Most of us would think we should throw the switch. To say this we need not deny in any way that there is a real loss to Bob—emotional as well as financial—in the destruction of his car. But between a car, however precious, and a child's life, there is no comparison. This is true even though the child's being on the track is no fault of Bob's—likely he does not know the kid at all—and even if he took great pains to park his car safely. Whether anyone is to be blamed is not the question.

Unger and Singer argue that we—you and I and most everyone living in affluent countries today—are in exactly the same situation in regard to people in desperate need elsewhere

in the world. Not to help them—not to “throw the switch” by sending money we can readily spare—is in effect to abandon them to miserable but preventable fates. In effect: remember, like good utilitarians, we are talking about the *consequences* of action or inaction, not about intentions or blame or anything else the least bit morally fancy. The point is simply that we can make the world dramatically better for many other people at a comparatively minor cost to ourselves. Therefore, we should.

OBJECTIONS

It's not like we don't know, or couldn't readily figure out, where to send the money, should that be anyone's worry. I will even follow Singer and Unger's lead and give you some options right now. To “throw the switch,” you can get out your credit card right now and go to https://secure.oxfamamerica.org/site/SPageServer?pagename=main_donate_go (for Oxfam; or call 1-800-77-OXFAM) or http://www.supportunicef.org/site/c.dvKUI9OWInj6H/b.7677883/k.2C8F/Donate_now.htm (for UNICEF; or call 1-800-FOR-KIDS). Or look up your local soup kitchen or homeless shelter. One or two phone calls and you will have, alas, plenty of options. The problem cannot be that we just don't know what to do.

Other worries may come up. It may be objected, for example, that we don't know for sure that money donated to charitable organizations will actually end up feeding or helping people. This is a legitimate concern, for sure. But surely it doesn't justify doing or giving nothing at all. It is not hard to research the available options and find out which do the best by the intended recipients. Seriously: this is not a real obstacle for people who are very used to searching the Web to look into user feedback on competing products or to research political issues. If nothing else, just give to Oxfam or UNICEF, as noted, which are reliably among the best. Besides, even if there are some inefficiencies, at least some aid will get through. Which is way better than none at all.

Singer considers some other likely objections. It is true, for example, that every affluent person, including those far more affluent than you or me, has the same obligation (barring those situations where every dollar really is needed for basic survival). If everyone who has the same obligation contributed their fair (perhaps, proportional?) share, though, then your obligation and mine would probably be much lower. So why should we contribute more than our “fair shares”? Moreover, it could be argued that affluent people ought to contribute collectively through governmental aid, which is funded more equitably, at least in theory, through taxes.

The fact is, however, that other people, right now at least, are *not* stepping up to do their part. However unfortunate or unfair it might be, that is part of the scene too. There is still the question of how we—those of us who are trying to think about the situation morally and do the right thing—should respond to real needs that are not, for whatever reason, being met.

Suppose Bob were at the siding with a dozen other Bugatti owners, say—maybe they are holding a little Bugatti show in the railroad yard—and any of the others could also throw the switch and take out his or her car instead of Bob's. But none of them do. Is Bob thereby excused? Again, if you were Bob, what would you do? Of course it isn't fair, but why are we arguing about fairness at a time like this?

Certainly there is a good case for increasing foreign aid, too. Organized and sustained by governments, the aid could be more reliably and widely delivered, and the costs shared

proportionally by all. That too, a utilitarian could argue, is an ethical imperative. At the moment, however, such foreign aid is miniscule compared to the need, and also (despite some persistent misconceptions) miniscule relative to the resources of affluent countries like the United States. The U.S. contribution to global food and health aid, for instance, does not even meet the very modest United Nations recommended target of 0.7 percent of Gross National Product. Currently our rate is 0.09 percent—a tiny 135th of our military budget—not even half of Japan's 0.22 percent or a tenth of Denmark's 0.97 percent.

Thus, just as we cannot count on other individuals, situated as we are, to do their parts, neither can we count on our government to step up to the task, at least as things stand today. Presumably the argument therefore also requires that we get involved politically to try to change American budget priority in the future. In the meantime, however, the need remains, as does our individual capacity to address it directly.

Singer does not deny that morality asks of us a sacrifice of sorts here. We all could live more luxuriously and conveniently if we spent that money on ourselves or our families. There are genuine pleasures we will have to forgo. The analogy to Bob and his Bugatti is carefully constructed: Bob too pays a price. But if the moral life can be tough, Singer says, that is just the way things are. We should be thankful that we somehow lucked into being on the giving end instead of on the needy end—since from the moral point of view it could just as easily have been the other way around.

Nor is anything particularly imposing really being asked of us—certainly nothing like the costs potential recipients are suffering now. A used car, kept longer, rather than a new one, will get us around just as well. Not dropping \$50 or \$100 for a restaurant meal will not kill us. Singer is not even requiring any particular percentage of “tithe.” He himself now gives about one quarter of his income to famine-relief agencies, a level he says he hopes to increase still further, but the amount will vary with different people's situations. The question to all of us is how much we truly need, not how little we can get away with giving or whether some preset amount is enough. Singer reports that from the first time he saw appeals in the newspapers or on TV to help starving people, he wondered why people were asked to donate so very little. Why indeed.

EVALUATING THE ARGUMENT

To “Use Your Tools,” as students of ethics and readers of this book, your first challenge is to make sure you understand Singer's argument. The case is not necessarily just utilitarian, but for our purposes you might concentrate on the utilitarian basics. (Part of the strength of Singer's argument, indeed, is that the very basics are all he thinks we need.) To be sure you have it right, write Singer's main argument over in your own words. Try to put it as clearly and simply as possible. You might even try it out on a few people to be sure you have succeeded—and take note of their reactions.

Once you have outlined and understood Singer's argument, your task is to analyze and evaluate it. What do you think are the likely objections to it? How do you think Singer would respond?

As you consider objections, keep in mind the families of values we have been reviewing. Some objections will likely be from a utilitarian point of view: that is, they will share Singer's starting point. Is it true, for example, that giving away substantial chunks of our income will have the strongly positive net benefits Singer projects? Why or why not?

Are they the best possible consequences achievable with that money? (If they aren't, according to you, what would be? Shouldn't we therefore give substantial amounts of money for those purposes, then?)

Or might the problems with Singer's argument (if there are such) trace back to utilitarianism itself? Traditionally it is the Ethics of the Person that stands most clearly in opposition to utilitarian thinking. Utilitarianism, as we've seen, makes a somewhat conditional defense of rights, for example. Perhaps we have *rights* to do with our income as we please, even if the consequences of not doing something else with it are very bad for some other people. What would it take to work out this response? (You might also check out the critical literature in response to Singer.)

On the other hand, is Singer denying this? He's not for *forcing* people to make such major donations, is he? Though there could be a question of taxes. . . .

Then again, maybe the Ethics of the Person could also make a case, even as strong a case as Singer's, for donating money to help save others' lives. Maybe those others are the ones with the really pressing or relevant rights. Or maybe it is not really a question of rights at all, but of respect for persons understood in a somewhat different way. Don't assume, anyway, that a case against utilitarianism disposes of Singer's challenge: it may recur from the point of view of other families of values as well.

Consider setting up a symposium or some other whole-class ways of bringing your thoughts to your classmates and working them through together. Remember that your task is still exploratory. You don't have to come up with some final and ironclad view about these questions. On the other hand, they are not just abstract, either. There are many ways to help others in need, right around us and right now, and it certainly would not hurt to make it part of your questioning, whatever you conclude, to ask how you might find at least some immediate and unobjectionable ways to do so, on whatever scale you think appropriate.

NOTE

For Singer's full argument, see his book *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (Random House, 2009), and for more of his writings in general, see <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/>. See also the FAQ page of his website. Full text of "The Singer Solution to World Poverty" can be found online at <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/19990905.htm>.