

Eleven Objections to Utilitarianism

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In this essay Harwood examines eleven criticisms of various forms of utilitarianism (he mentions twelve forms), arguing that the most plausible form of utilitarianism is act-utilitarianism (see reading 19), as opposed to rule-utilitarianism (see reading 20). However, act-utilitarianism is still subject to severe criticisms, including the criticisms that utilitarianism is unjust, fails to grant sufficient weight to promise keeping, enjoins going into an experience machine (see reading 16), and gives undue weight to animals.

A. Introduction

I will discuss eleven significant objections to utilitarianism, though I will not accept all eleven. My purpose is not to bury utilitarianism once and for all but to survey a large number of objections and provoke further discussion, although I may perhaps put a few more nails in utilitarianism's coffin. I start by trying to clarify the nature of utilitarianism since it has so many versions both drawing criticism and developing as responses to criticism. Here is a list of twelve versions I will at least mention below (though some of these can be combined to form still more versions): motive-utilitarianism, act-utilitarianism, rule-utilitarianism, average utilitarianism, total utilitarianism, hedonistic utilitarianism, eudaimonistic utilitarianism, negative utilitarianism, welfare-utilitarianism, preference-satisfaction utilitarianism, felt-satisfaction utilitarianism, and ideal utilitarianism. Of course these twelve versions of utilitarianism do not correspond to the eleven

objections to utilitarianism I consider, but many of these versions were developed to deal with objections to other versions of utilitarianism. Indeed, many critics who thought they had finally driven a stake through the heart of utilitarianism have only seen utilitarianism live on by being transformed into another version.

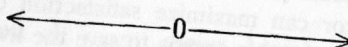
Utilitarianism is a consequentialist (that is, teleological) moral principle. As a moral principle, utilitarianism tells us how we should act. Consequentialism is not itself a moral principle but a category into which some moral principles fit. Consequentialism insists that an act is determined to be morally right (or morally wrong) exclusively by particular consequences of doing that act. (Consequentialism and utilitarianism can go beyond acts to include evaluations of institutions, policies, motives, and persons, but for simplicity I shall focus on acts and deemphasize versions of utilitarianism such as motive-utilitarianism.) Some include the maximizing theory of the right as a definition of consequentialism, but this would make the definition of consequentialism under-inclusive because we can imagine moral principles that value consequences alone but do not require maximizing good consequences (because, for example, there could be two different kinds of consequences to maximize and no rule for trading off between them). The particular consequences determining the rightness (or wrongness) of the act in question are specified not by consequentialism itself but by a particular consequentialist principle. Utilitarianism is the particular consequentialist principle that specifically concerns utility. Utility is psychological satisfaction (for example, pleasure, happiness, and well-being). Since utility is utilitarianism's only value,

utilitarianism is a monistic rather than a pluralistic moral principle. And it is utilitarianism's monism rather than its consequentialism that explains why utilitarianism requires maximizing utility. Because utility is the only value, there is no other value to check or limit the logical approach of requiring the gain of more and more of the only value.

Many versions of utilitarianism differ primarily according to which psychological satisfaction they emphasize. For example, hedonistic utilitarianism stresses pleasure; preference-satisfaction utilitarianism stresses satisfaction of preferences; ideal utilitarianism stresses what would be desired under ideal conditions; negative utilitarianism stresses that avoiding dissatisfaction is more important than gaining satisfaction; and welfare-utilitarianism stresses what is in the best interests of those whose well-being is in question. And of course, many of these psychological satisfactions interrelate and overlap with one another. Disutility—psychological dissatisfaction (for example, pain and unhappiness)—is the opposite of utility.

Utilitarianism essentially specifies that the consequences that determine an act's rightness (or wrongness) are the psychological satisfactions that the act causes. Utilitarianism is a monistic moral principle, since it implies that there is only one thing that has moral value, namely, psychological satisfaction. Since there is no other moral value to check or limit the value of psychological satisfaction, utilitarianism says an act is right only to the extent that it maximizes these satisfactions, that is, produces the greatest balance of satisfaction over dissatisfaction for all in the long run. If only dissatisfaction is available, then utilitarianism says an act is right to the extent that it minimizes dissatisfaction. This is not a second or separate value in utilitarianism; for we can represent utilitarianism as claiming that an act is right to the extent that its expected consequences fall as far to the right as possible on the following scale. The far left ranges to an infinite amount of dissatisfaction, the 0 represents where the amount

of satisfaction equals the amount of dissatisfaction, and the far right ranges to an infinite amount of satisfaction.



The left and right directions on the scale should not be confused with the political left or political right. Indeed, utilitarians have historically promoted governmental reforms, (for example, abolishing slavery, improving prisons, and feeding, clothing, and housing the poor) that the political left has also endorsed.

B. The Eleven Objections

1. *Utilitarianism Is Overly Demanding*

Perhaps the first objection that occurs to students is that utilitarianism appears to demand an extreme amount of self-sacrifice from us. This stems from utilitarianism's monism, its insistence that only one thing has moral value, and its insistence that we obtain more and more of that thing without limit; for there is no other value to counterbalance or limit it. Must we really sell all of our nonessential material goods (for example, musical recordings and baseball cards) and give the money to worthy charitable causes (for example, relief of famine)? Further, must we be ready to sacrifice friends and loved ones by acting impartially to maximize satisfaction? Bentham stated the utilitarian formula "Everybody to count for one, and nobody for more than one."¹ Utilitarianism's impartiality stems from its counting everyone's satisfaction as equally valuable (so long as the amount of the satisfaction is the same). Later, we will see that eudaimonistic utilitarianism seems to depart from Bentham's statement, and we will see an objection to the statement from those who believe that interpersonal comparisons of utility are impossible. Alleged counterexamples often hurled at utilitarianism include: 1) the instance where utilitarianism requires that the least useful person in a lifeboat lost at sea be killed and eaten whenever necessary to keep the

other persons in the lifeboat alive long enough to be rescued; and 2) the instance where a healthy and innocent person comes in for a checkup, but his doctor can maximize satisfaction by killing him and using his organs to save the lives of five or more other people. Indeed, if the person in charge of the lifeboat or the doctor, respectively, can make these facts clear enough to us, then utilitarianism requires us to submit to being killed rather than to resist.

So we can see why a version of Objection 1, called the "objection from integrity," says that utilitarianism requires us to have a psychologically impossible (or nearly impossible) impartiality and detachment from our own lives, projects, friends, and loved ones. Of course, utilitarianism scarcely requires us to attempt the impossible, since that would be futile and would fail to maximize *expected* satisfaction; for the satisfaction expected from an act known to be impossible must be nil. The objection thus seems to be merely a complaint that morality is sometimes or oftentimes difficult to live up to. But this is hardly a conclusive objection. Nobody ever said it was going to be easy to be moral. Indeed, all or almost all moral principles require us to give up our lives under some scenarios. Even the most self-centered of moral principles, ethical egoism, which commands each person to maximize his or her own satisfaction, requires us to commit suicide the moment when the satisfaction we can expect in the rest of our lives is outweighed—even slightly—by the dissatisfaction we can expect in the rest of our lives. Every moral principle seems to require extreme actions under some scenario or other. And it would also be extreme to require this alternative: "*Never* do any extreme acts." So the objection that utilitarianism sometimes leads to extreme self-sacrifice or extreme acts is inconclusive.

Moreover, I suspect that utilitarianism is not as extremely demanding in everyday life as many think. Here is how a utilitarian could argue that utilitarianism is easy enough to pursue in every-

day life. All indications are that overpopulation and depletion of needed natural resources will get worse. Therefore, rather than give almost all of one's wealth away now, one ought to invest one's wealth wisely, probably making more wealth, and hold one's wealth in reserve for these more troubled times ahead, when charity will be needed more than ever and when the stakes will be even greater. In the meantime, one can gain satisfaction from the security of having wise investments and from the knowledge that one is self-sufficient and not a charity case oneself. Indeed, some investment activities (for example, following the business news) and investments (for example, collectibles such as baseball cards, rare musical recordings, and other art) are intrinsically satisfying for many investors. As long as the population explosion continues and needed natural resources continue to be depleted faster than they are replaced, one can maximize satisfaction by wisely investing his or her wealth to make more wealth and by holding it in reserve to help with the greater calamity likely to occur in the foreseeable future. If these trends continue through the rest of one's life, with a greater calamity always likely to occur in the foreseeable future, then one can then leave all of his or her amassed wealth to the charity one believes will maximize satisfaction. One's leaving wealth to others at one's death is no personal sacrifice at all, since "you can't take it with you when you die." But one's legal will must sacrifice some satisfaction of one's relatives if they are not needy enough. Some critics of utilitarianism will doubtless say, "How convenient!" But that misses the point here, which is that at least utilitarianism would dodge Objection 1, which claims utilitarianism is not convenient for individuals but overly demanding.

Finally, in case one thinks that utilitarianism will still be overly demanding in too many cases, consider these two arguments by Kurt Baier:

Surely, in the absence of any *special* reasons for preferring someone else's interests, *everyone's*

interests are best served if *everyone* puts his own interests first. For, by and large, everyone is himself the best judge of what is in his own best interests, since everyone usually knows best what his plans, aims, ambitions, or aspirations are. Moreover, everyone is more diligent in the promotion of his own interests than that of others.²

2. Utilitarianism Eliminates Supererogation

Some have argued that since utilitarianism leaves no room for supererogation (that is, self-sacrifice above and beyond the call of duty), utilitarianism objectionably flies in the face of commonsense morality, which recognizes supererogation. For example, during a hasty retreat a soldier might stop to pick up and carry a fellow soldier many hazardous yards to safety, and endure being wounded. There seems to be nothing *above* or *beyond* the call of utilitarian duty, since utilitarianism says our duty is to *maximize* satisfaction. Of course, one cannot cause an amount of satisfaction above or beyond the maximum amount. So we seem to face a dilemma. Either we reject utilitarianism, or else we reject supererogation.

But this is a false dilemma, since ties are overlooked. Utilitarianism allows that the expected satisfaction of two (or even more) alternatives can be tied for the maximal amount. One of these alternatives can involve more sacrifice (dissatisfaction) for us than that expected from the other alternatives tied for the maximal amount of satisfaction. Utilitarianism cannot *require* us to make this sacrifice by choosing this alternative among those that are tied, since all of those alternatives are equally acceptable, but utilitarianism *permits* us to choose the alternative that sacrifices more of our satisfaction than the other alternatives do. So utilitarianism does allow for moral self-sacrifice that is not morally required (that is, moral self-sacrifice beyond the call of duty).

One may object that ties are so uncommon that utilitarianism still leaves too little room for supererogation, which is the main point of Objection 2. But ties are probably more common than

many of us think. For example, Raymond D. Gas-til interprets James Q. Wilson's research as pointing out

that almost all recent major American studies testing hypotheses that major long-term behavior changes result from particular social policy or educational inputs have provided inconclusive or negative findings. Thus, studies have shown that the type of school or educational method makes no difference (Coleman report). . . . [Wilson] suggests, and it is probably true, that in real-life situations there is too much going on, too many cycles of reinforcement stretched over too many years, for particular interventions to get up out of the noise.³

This feature of ties is notorious in the so-called dismal science, economics, the social science utilitarianism has perhaps influenced most. Some joke that one can lay all the economists from end to end and never reach a definite conclusion. And some joke that the search continues for the one-armed economist, the one who cannot say "On the other hand. . . ." The serious undertone to these jokes is that utilitarianism all too often has us consider two or more alternatives which, as far as we can tell, are tied in the amount of satisfaction they will produce. Perhaps this is why some joke that economists know the price of everything but the value of nothing.

3. Utilitarianism Is Unjust

Utilitarianism is often criticized for failing to treat retributive justice (giving the guilty and only the guilty the punishment they deserve in fair proportion to the severity of their respective crimes) as having intrinsic moral importance. Familiar counterexamples to utilitarianism here include: 1) a case where a scientific genius murders his wife just as he is about to develop a cure for cancer, and giving him the punishment he justly deserves will delay the development of the cure for years or decades; 2) a case involving

racial violence, where a local woman has been raped and murdered, and angry mobs are about to take the law into their own hands by executing people of the opposite race whom they suspect of being involved in the crime. The sheriff can easily prevent all this violence, which is likely to kill innocent people, by framing the useless town drunk who remembers nothing about the night in question and who has no alibi. The sheriff alone knows that he is innocent because he locked the drunk up for public drunkenness at the same time the crime was committed in the middle of the night; and 3) a case where parking offenders (or other minor offenders) are punished way out of proportion to the severity of their offenses whenever the deterrent effect of the unjustly severe punishment produces so much satisfaction from a nearly perfectly obeyed law that it maximizes satisfaction even while leading to the torture and execution of that one driver in a million or more who is foolish enough to break the law. Critics object that utilitarianism would unjustly: 1) fail to give the scientist the severe punishment he deserves; 2) frame the innocent town drunk; and 3) sometimes torture and execute people for merely parking illegally.

Critics also charge that utilitarianism violates distributive justice (giving each person his or her fair share of benefits and burdens in society). Familiar counterexamples to utilitarianism here include: 1) the case where, instead of fairly and randomly determining who should bear the burden of dying by casting lots, the occupants of a lifeboat lost at sea kill and eat the least useful occupant as a last resort to keep all others alive long enough to be rescued; 2) a case of secretly killing a healthy man just in for a routine checkup in order to maximize satisfaction by using his various organs in a number of life-saving operations; and 3) a case of neglecting to give ordinary people their fair share of benefits and instead indulging so-called utility monsters, people with nearly insatiable appetites for wealth and for whom the general economic law of diminishing marginal utility of wealth does not apply because they

are so miserly and greedy that each new unit of wealth obtained causes far more satisfaction for the utility monster than it would for those with normal human psychologies.

Utilitarians often dismiss such examples as unrealistic and thus irrelevant to our real world of troubles. Utilitarians say they have done enough to develop a moral principle that deals with the problems of real life, and need not develop a moral principle that covers every imaginable problem in every fantasy land. But the utilitarian defense that these cases are unrealistic misses the point. How realistic or unrealistic a case is surely is a matter of degree. These cases are realistic enough that some of them can and will eventually occur in real life, and when they do utilitarianism will be refuted, a refutation we can know in advance by thinking ahead.

Indeed, there have been, after all, some lifeboat cases where cannibalism has been a last resort to survive. And there have been some awfully greedy people in the history of the world. Perhaps they were utility monsters. And some would say that at least one of these situations recently occurred in California, and even one of these counterexamples is enough to refute utilitarianism. The nearly all-white jury that acquitted the police officers of nearly all criminal charges in the famous videotaped beating of motorist Rodney King has been called the jury from another planet! But of course it was a real jury. Suppose you were one of these jurors who believed there was a reasonable doubt on almost all the charges against the policemen but who also predicted, as many others did, that rioting would occur if almost all the policemen were acquitted of these charges. So, you could realistically change your vote from "not guilty beyond a reasonable doubt" to "guilty beyond a reasonable doubt" on every charge and create a mistrial, preventing the policemen from being acquitted on any charge, allowing a new trial, and probably preventing enough violence to maximize satisfaction with your vote of "guilty beyond a reasonable doubt."

I conclude that at least some of these counter-examples concerning retributive and distributive justice seem realistic enough to refute utilitarianism, especially since truth is often stranger than fiction.

4. *Utilitarianism Fails to Take Promises Seriously Enough*

Utilitarianism implies that keeping one's promises has no intrinsic moral value apart from any satisfaction it causes but has only instrumental and contingent moral value. Objection 4 pits utilitarianism squarely against commonsense morality, which recognizes the intrinsic moral importance of keeping promises. For example, one promises his or her dying mother to beautify her grave by always putting fresh and gorgeous flowers on her grave when her birthday arrives each year. But since an afterlife with a dissatisfied mother is unexpected, utilitarianism requires one to completely discount one's solemn pledge. After all, she will never know the difference. So utilitarianism emphasizes that life is for the living, and that one should spend his or her time, energy, and money, not putting flowers on a grave, but doing what will maximize satisfaction.

Utilitarians reply that we should not uncritically accept whatever commonsense morality dictates. Sometimes commonsense morality is wrong (for example, racist and sexist views that used to be considered commonsensical). But this reply will go only so far; for the commonsense belief in the intrinsic importance of keeping promises survives critical scrutiny that racist and sexist views cannot.

The example also seems to commit the appeal to pity. It is surely pitiful that the dying mother has such a son. But the mere fact that something is pitiful is not a conclusive reason against it. For example, it is pitiful to amputate a child's leg, but this is all too often medically necessary and for the best.

Further, some forms of utilitarianism would count the mother's preference as something to

satisfy. Felt-satisfaction utilitarianism would not count her preference, since she will never feel the satisfaction. But preference-satisfaction utilitarianism can count it. Yet as Robert E. Goodin has said in objecting to a somewhat different form of utilitarianism, the closer a version of utilitarianism comes to embracing an "aesthetic ideal regardless of whether or not that is good for any living being, the less credible this analysis is as an ethical theory."⁴ Keeping the promise to beautify one's mother's grave each year does seem to be a matter of aesthetics, which is presumably distinct from ethics.

There is a further problem with this type of utilitarian defense. Where do we draw the line in respecting the preferences of the dead? It seems arbitrary to limit it to those covered by promises. The other preferences were just as real and important to those now dead. Sometimes it is a fluke that one preference was covered by a promise and another was not. For example, suppose our mother is struck by lightning before we can make another promise to her. But surely we cannot cater to all the preferences the dead had. We cannot cater to all the preferences that those now dead had to live longer. Otherwise, we might have to exhaust our resources trying to put them in cryogenic freeze so that they can be thawed later when science might be able to revive them. But this seems absurd. Drawing the line at death, when preferences and satisfactions and all other psychological states presumably cease, seems less arbitrary than trying to distinguish between which preferences of the dead we will try to satisfy.

Utilitarianism cannot completely dismiss Objection 4 as requiring the impossible, namely, the satisfaction of a dead person's preference. One might think that death prevents the preference from being satisfied. But this is to assume that felt-satisfactions are the only satisfactions, which seems false. For example, a man prefers that his wife not commit adultery. But his wife is clever and decides while he is on submarine duty for months to have a secret affair with a sexually inexperienced bookworm who is a leading specialist

in prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and who shyly wants only a few months more of secret sexual experience. The wife rightly expects, let us suppose, that her husband will never know the difference. He will have no felt-dissatisfaction of his preference that she not commit adultery.

Felt-satisfaction utilitarianism requires the wife to have the affair she and the bookworm want, but preference-satisfaction utilitarianism would at least count her husband's preference that she not do so (though whether there is an affair or not will make no difference to how he feels). Some critics charge that this is enough to refute felt-satisfaction utilitarianism. But again we should be concerned about whether the alleged counterexample commits the fallacy of appealing to pity. It may seem a pity that this dutiful submariner is deceived by his wife, who has broken her marriage vows (that is, promises). But mere pity is not decisive.

The error utilitarianism makes about promises is exposed by another example, though. You promise to meet me for an ordinary lunch. On your way to meet me you spot victims just emerging from a car accident in a remote area. They need your medical help immediately. So you stop to help them at the cost of making me dissatisfied with your lateness to lunch. Utilitarianism clearly requires this, and so does commonsense morality. Where they differ is in the reply you give when you come to lunch late. Commonsense morality implies, rightly I think, that you *owe* me an explanation and an expression of regret that you were sidetracked. A utilitarian cannot *simply* express sincere regret here. Once your dissatisfaction was outweighed by the prevention of more serious dissatisfaction for the accident victims, there was either nothing to be regretted or at least the expression of regret is viewed as a completely separate act, whose rightness or wrongness is determined exclusively by a separate calculation of its consequences rather than on a backward-looking expression of a genuinely felt emotion. Utilitarianism's unnecessarily complex conceptual separation of these conceptually, emotionally, and simply linked acts seems mistaken.

5. Average and Total Utilitarianism Produce Absurdities

Average utilitarianism states that an act is morally right only to the extent that it maximizes the amount of satisfaction per person in existence (that is, maximizes the mean of utility). Total utilitarianism states that an act is morally right only to the extent that it maximizes the aggregate amount of satisfaction (that is, maximizes the sum of satisfaction). These two forms of utilitarianism lead to different results only when population policy is involved; for, if the population is held constant, then average satisfaction and total satisfaction must rise or fall together.

Critics charge that average utilitarianism degenerates into number worship that squanders satisfaction, whereas total utilitarianism will lead us to reduce the standard of living too much and make the world barely livable. Either way, utilitarianism seems objectionable.

First, here is a counterexample to average utilitarianism. Suppose we have a person who is quite satisfied in his life but whose level of satisfaction is always consistently and predictably below the average amount of satisfaction people have. And suppose that from our experience trying to help him we know that there is no way to raise his level of satisfaction without lowering the overall average amount of satisfaction. Now, if we can raise the average of satisfaction for all by painlessly killing and disposing of this fellow who is below average, then average utilitarianism requires us to do so. But this seems absurd and contrary to a key point of utilitarianism, which is that satisfaction is the only value. Here, average utilitarianism requires us to squander an amount of net satisfaction just to raise a mere number, an average level of satisfaction. We can suppose that not one more unit of satisfaction is gained, but that the average is raised only by subtracting the below-average fellow from the population. (This would be a rather extreme case of what baseball genius Branch Rickey called "addition by subtraction"!.) So average utilitarianism seems unacceptable, even to many utilitarians.

But total utilitarianism seems to err on an even more massive scale; for it requires us to bring more and more people into the world—even if this lowers the average level of satisfaction—so long as adding another person to the world adds more net satisfaction to the world than any other alternative. The worry here is that total utilitarianism will be too tolerant of the population explosion and will lead to a world where standards of living are drastically lowered and almost all of us eke out a life just barely worth living because our planet is filled to capacity. Because there will be so many of us, this will make up for the extremely low average satisfaction we will have and will maximize total satisfaction. Total satisfaction is figured by adding the amount of satisfaction each person has. Making the world barely satisfactory for everyone seems to miss a key point of utilitarianism, which is that we should try to improve the lives of everyone as much as possible. So total utilitarianism seems unacceptable, even to many utilitarians.

Since utilitarianism must take a stand on population policy, and since both its alternatives—average and total utilitarianism—seem absurd, is utilitarianism *obviously* unacceptable here? No, because total utilitarianism *might* survive. In real life, we cannot jam the planet full of people and expect to retain enough control of the situation to maximize total satisfaction. First, the more people there are to satisfy, the harder it is likely to be to satisfy them. Second, a world where everyone ekes out a life barely worth living is likely to be unstable, presenting a great danger of disease and a chain reaction of catastrophes going through the population. Given these empirically contingent facts, it is unlikely that pushing population to such extreme limits will maximize expected total satisfaction, since the catastrophes would involve so much dissatisfaction and since the chances of them occurring would be so high.

In conclusion, utilitarianism's best prospect for surviving Objection 5 is the endorsement of total utilitarianism and the rejection of average utilitarianism. But even this strategy will probably fail,

since we saw in the previous section (section 4) that utilitarianism should avoid overreliance on contingent empirical facts and avoid dismissal of hypothetical counterexamples. A world where we can maximize total satisfaction by increasing the population explosion and lowering average satisfaction is possible. It might be, for example, that our technology will improve to allow us to control the weather and the entire planet and that the more people we have the more labor power we have to enable us to keep the low average satisfaction stable and to avoid catastrophes. So utilitarianism seems unacceptable because it is woefully unprepared for this eventuality. It will yield unacceptable requirements whenever that day arrives. But we are entitled to think ahead and find utilitarianism unacceptable now.

6. Rule-Utilitarianism Is Incoherent or Redundant

Rule-utilitarianism (sometimes called restricted or indirect utilitarianism) is often distinguished from act-utilitarianism (sometimes called extreme or direct utilitarianism). R. M. Hare says:

Act-utilitarianism is the view that we have to apply the so-called 'principle of utility' [that is, maximize satisfaction] directly to individual acts. . . . Rule-utilitarianism . . . is the view that this test is not to be applied to individual actions, but to *kinds* of action. . . . Actions are to be assessed by asking whether they are forbidden or enjoined by certain moral rules or principles; and it is only when we start to ask which moral rules or principles we are to adopt for assessing actions, that we apply the utilitarian test.⁵

Rule-utilitarianism was developed to try to save utilitarianism from the sort of counterexamples we have seen from commonsense morality (for example, "do not hang the innocent," and "keep promises"). Utilitarianism recognizes that commonsense moral rules such as "Keep promises" and "do not kill" are generally useful in gaining satisfaction.

Jonathan Harrison, however, gives at least three good reasons for rejecting rule-utilitarianism. First, "It is not the case that I ought to obey a rule which has good consequences, however bad the consequences of my obeying it are."⁶ For example, "Do not steal" is a rule which, if generally adopted, would seem to maximize satisfaction, but we can easily imagine a scenario where stealing a radio is necessary to warn people to evacuate before a dam bursts and kills thousands of people. If the rule-utilitarian makes an exception to the rules to cover such cases, then rule-utilitarianism would seem redundant; for it would contain rules such as "Do not kill, except to maximize satisfaction"; "Do not steal, except to maximize satisfaction"; and "Keep promises, but only if it maximizes satisfaction." These rules tell us nothing more than utilitarianism's fundamental rule "maximize satisfaction for all in the long run."

Second, following J. J. C. Smart, Harrison argues that "rule-utilitarianism is a manifestation of rule-worship."⁷ Act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism lead to different conclusions only if rule-utilitarianism sometimes forbids us from breaking a rule by doing an act that maximizes satisfaction. So rule-utilitarianism seems more a form of rule-worship than a form of utilitarianism, which says satisfaction—not rule following—is the only value.

Third, rule-utilitarians fail to distinguish three types of rule: 1) an actually operating social rule; 2) "a general moral *belief*, which most people in most societies have, *about* this (social) rule, to the effect that it usually or always ought to be acted upon"; and 3) "the *fact* about the social rule that it ought usually to be obeyed, whether most members of the society which has it think that it ought to be obeyed or not."⁸ If rule-utilitarianism means (1) then it is still subject to the other objections above, but at least it is coherent. But if rule-utilitarianism means either (2) or (3), then it will end up referring to itself—for it is also a rule—in such a viciously circular way that it will be incoherent.

Finally, there is a fourth objection to rule-

utilitarianism that Harrison does not explore. This objection uses the concept of *extensional equivalence*. Two moralities are extensionally equivalent if they always agree about what we should do in any case. Some critics argue that rule-utilitarianism is extensionally equivalent to act-utilitarianism and thus cannot coherently defend utilitarianism from familiar objections using plausible examples from commonsense morality (for example, "Do not hang the innocent") as counterexamples to utilitarianism.⁹ As R. M. Hare says, "The merit of rule-utilitarianism has been said to be that it is more in accord with our common moral beliefs than is act-utilitarianism. . . ."¹⁰ But if the two are extensionally equivalent, then rule-utilitarianism has no more merit than act-utilitarianism. Act- and rule-utilitarianism do seem to be extensionally equivalent, because if rule-utilitarianism ever disagreed with act-utilitarianism and required us to follow a rule by doing an act that failed to maximize satisfaction, then rule-utilitarianism would be rejecting the lone value of utilitarianism, satisfaction (not mere obedience to rules). Further, act- and rule-utilitarianism seem to agree and converge because the adoption of a rule is itself an act. So if a rule really were so useful that its adoption would maximize satisfaction, then act-utilitarianism would require us to do the act of adopting that rule and taking that rule to heart.

In conclusion, the best prospect for utilitarianism's surviving Objection 6 is to reject rule-utilitarianism and emphasize the strength and flexibility of act-utilitarianism, which still has its own problems, as we have seen.

7. *Utilitarianism Requires Us to Enter the Experience Machine*

I suspect that all of us are intrigued by the experimental new technology called *virtual reality*. Some models are already used as flight simulators to train pilots. But imagine programming one's own artificial universe! What wonders would it contain?! With utilitarianism, however, it seems

we will be forced to have too much of a good thing here. Robert Nozick has theorized about what he calls the *experience machine*, which resembles virtual reality, though he fails to apply his example of the experience machine directly to refuting utilitarianism (see reading IV.16 in the text).¹¹

We can use the experience machine to object to utilitarianism because utilitarianism will require us to spend our entire lives in the machine if that will maximize satisfaction, as it might very well do. A life spent inside the experience machine seems like one of mental masturbation, an unreal and degraded life unworthy of us, though it will seem perfectly real and satisfying to us as long as we stay inside the machine. Utilitarianism's monism, its insistence that satisfaction is the only moral value, prevents utilitarians from placing greater moral value on genuine, veridical experiences than on artificial yet credible simulations. Utilitarianism is objectionable because its monism leaves no room to place any intrinsic value on truth, knowledge, or reality, with which we lose touch once we enter the experience machine. Moreover, independent of utilitarianism's monism, utilitarianism is also objectionable because the subjective character of what utilitarianism counts as valuable—namely, the subjects' feelings or satisfactions—allows value to be radically and objectionably disconnected from how things are in the world external to the subjects.

8. Utilitarianism Wildly Overstates Our Duties to Animals

One might conceive of Objection 8 as a version of Objection 1, since animals (I use 'animals' to mean 'nonhuman animals') outnumber humans by so much that humans will be swamped with duties to maximize the satisfactions animals are psychologically capable of having. (Of course, some living things evidently have no psychology.) But Objection 8 can be made by those who refuse to object to utilitarianism as overly demanding; for they can object that what is wrong with utili-

tarianism here is not how much it demands but what utilitarianism is demanding of us, namely, the satisfaction of mere nonhuman animals. Utilitarians from Bentham to Mill to Singer have insisted on considering animals in moral deliberations. But critics charge that utilitarianism will all too often require debased or beastly satisfaction. The critics charge that utilitarianism implies that it is better to be a pig satisfied than to be Socrates dissatisfied.

In response to such criticisms, John Stuart Mill tried to develop eudaimonistic utilitarianism, which would distinguish qualities of happiness, with some types of satisfaction having more moral value than other types present in the same quantity but of lower quality. But eudaimonistic utilitarianism is incompatible with utilitarianism's monism. Since utilitarianism insists that there is only one moral value, satisfaction, there is no other value to which a utilitarian can consistently appeal in claiming that one type of satisfaction is morally better than another type of satisfaction.¹²

9. Utilitarianism Panders to Bigots and Sadists

Critics charge that utilitarianism is fundamentally mistaken in treating racist, sexist, bigoted, and sadistic satisfaction as intrinsically valuable. Since satisfaction is utilitarianism's only value, utilitarianism has no other value enabling the utilitarian to distinguish between better and worse satisfactions. Only the amount of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) caused makes an act right (or wrong), not whether the satisfaction is noble or unbiased. Critics charge that some motivations ought not to be satisfied because they are intrinsically wrong and their satisfaction is morally bankrupt and completely without value.

But Tom L. Beauchamp and LeRoy Walters suggest that utilitarianism can dodge this objection. They say:

because 'perverse' [for example, extremely sadistic] desires have been determined on the basis of past experience to cut against the objectives of

utilitarianism by creating conditions productive of unhappiness, the desires (preferences) could never even be permitted to count. We discount preferences to rape children. . . . Preferences that serve merely to frustrate the preferences of others are thus ruled out by the goal of utilitarianism. As Mill himself argued, the cultivation of certain kinds of desires is built into the 'ideal' of utilitarianism.¹³

But this defense of utilitarianism is unconvincing, since we saw in [objection]8 that Mill's eudaimonistic utilitarianism was developed to handle similar objections to the kinds of satisfactions utilitarianism would respect, and we saw that eudaimonistic utilitarianism seems inconsistent because it abandons utilitarianism's monism, its insistence that there is only one value, namely, satisfaction. As Hare suggested, "Mill's mistake was perhaps to try to incorporate ideals into a utilitarian theory, which cannot really absorb them."¹⁴ Utilitarianism's single-minded pursuit of the maximization of only one value leaves no room for other ideals. Further, unfortunately some preferences to rape children do not serve merely to frustrate the preferences of others but also serve to satisfy the rapists. The problem for utilitarianism is not the general prohibition of rape; it surely does condemn almost all rapes. Rather, Objection 9 claims utilitarianism is pandering to sadists and bigots by counting their sadistic and bigoted satisfactions as morally valuable *at all*—even if their satisfactions are readily overridden by the dissatisfactions of others.

10. Utilitarianism Makes Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility

I am a child.

I last awhile.

You can't conceive of the pleasure in my smile.

—The Buffalo Springfield (1967)¹⁵

Utilitarianism requires interpersonal comparisons of utility (that is, satisfaction) because it re-

quires us to maximize satisfaction for all in the long run. Thus, we must consider trade-offs promoting the satisfaction of some at the expense of allowing the dissatisfaction of others in order to maximize the net satisfaction for everyone over the long haul. But how can we compare one person's pleasure, for example, with another's pain? Are not pleasure and pain subjective experiences? Are not thresholds and tolerances for pain highly idiosyncratic and unpredictable? Being stuck with a needle, for example, seems to bother some people much more than others. And even though sugar presumably tastes the same to everyone, some seem to have more of a sweet tooth than others and enjoy sweets immeasurably more than others. After all, critics charge, it is a well-recognized maxim that there is no accounting for or disputing matters of taste (that is, *De gustibus non est disputandum*).

Objection 10 is flashy, but there is less here than meets the eye. Objection 10 relies on what it takes to be commonsensical, namely, that people enjoy and value the same psychological experiences differently. This is true even for basic psychological experiences such as pain. Masochists sometimes seem to enjoy significant levels of pain. But there is an equivocation in Objection 10 that is illustrated by the following joke: A masochist goes up to a sadist and says, "Hit me"; the sadist prepares to hit the masochist but then, realizing the masochist will enjoy being hit, says, "No." These mind games take some surprising twists and turns for which human psychology is notorious. But the point is that pain or sweet taste should not be equated with satisfaction. Utilitarianism is fully capable of allowing individual differences in what brings about satisfaction. The bottom line is to maximize the satisfaction, not any particular experience we might misidentify as satisfaction.

Moreover, we commonsensically make interpersonal comparisons every day. For example, we build freeways even though we know that it is just a matter of time before an innocent baby who would not have died nearly so soon had the free-

way never been built gets crushed in an automobile accident on the freeway. But the great convenience of the freeway and the other lives saved by allowing ambulances and other emergency vehicles to use the new freeway to speed to emergencies outweighs the harm caused to the crushed baby. So, whatever plausibility Objection 10 gains by relying on common sense is blunted by the commonsensical way we make interpersonal comparisons of satisfaction everyday.

Further, interpersonal comparisons of satisfaction seem no more problematic than intrapersonal comparisons of satisfaction. All the same arguments for Objection 10 could be made against intrapersonal comparisons of satisfaction. After all, Objection 10 must allow that I might become a masochist or an old man with satisfactions incommensurable with those I can now have. Yet we still think that it makes good common sense to trade off some satisfaction at one stage of life (for example, exercising hard rather than enjoying more sleep) for more satisfaction later in life (for example, living longer and with fewer illnesses).

Furthermore, Objection 10 strikes me as being mathematically suspect. Even if satisfaction was as wildly unpredictable from person to person as Objection 10 states, which I doubt, would it not minimize our margin of error if we assumed that each person's satisfactions were comparable? It seems so. For if we started giving preference or extra weight to persons whose satisfaction was assumed to be weightier, then the wildly unpredictable nature of satisfaction, which Objection 10 insists upon, would imply that we are as apt to be preferring and weighting the satisfactions of the right persons (those whose satisfaction is more satisfying than others' satisfactions) as those of the wrong persons. If we chose the wrong person and thus gave extra weight, in deciding what to do, to the satisfactions of a person whose satisfactions are actually *less* satisfying than the satisfactions of others, then we have compounded any mistake we would have made by considering all satisfactions comparable, and we have extended the margin of error further than it was. For example, suppose we expect to get ten

percent more satisfaction by satisfying Pojman slightly than by satisfying Harwood slightly, but Pojman actually gets ten percent less satisfaction from being slightly satisfied than Harwood does from being slightly satisfied. Our margin of error is then twenty percent rather than the ten percent margin of error present in treating the satisfactions of Harwood and Pojman as comparable, only to learn that we could have obtained ten percent more satisfaction by satisfying Harwood slightly rather than satisfying Pojman slightly.

Finally, how can Objection 10 make sense of its claims such as, "Interpersonal comparisons of satisfaction are impossible because a slightly satisfied Harwood has immeasurably more satisfaction than a very satisfied Pojman. That's just the kind of guy Harwood is." How could we ever know such a thing unless interpersonal comparisons of satisfaction were not only possible but actually known? This very claim seems to make an interpersonal comparison of the satisfactions of Harwood and Pojman. The contradiction in claiming to know that interpersonal comparisons of satisfaction are impossible is similar to that of claiming, "My experience was impossible to describe; it was simply indescribable." Our making this very claim describes the experience. In calling our satisfactions incommensurable we make a comparison among them, namely, that they all have in common the feature for which we lack a scale by which we can accurately measure them all in the same units. But—and this is my main point—this common lack of a scale would also prevent anyone from knowing if we made a mistake in treating the satisfactions as comparable.

I conclude that rough-and-ready, short-and-snappy interpersonal comparisons of satisfaction are justified enough. Some interpersonal comparisons of utility are clearly much more plausible and defensible than others. For example, do we really have any doubt that the following claim is false: "Each time I lose a penny from my pocket change it causes me more dissatisfaction than all the dissatisfactions in human history combined"? The implications of Objection 10 are too extreme and absurd to accept.

11. *Utilitarianism Is Too Secretive, Undemocratic, and Elitist*

Since moral principles conceptually must concern how each person should live, we might think that any acceptable moral principle must be public and available for all to use in our thinking. But utilitarians often think that it would be a mistake to let most or all people directly pursue maximizing satisfaction, since too many will show bias or incompetence in calculating what will maximize satisfaction, thereby leading to too much dissatisfaction. Many critics find utilitarianism's restriction of the direct pursuit of maximizing satisfaction to a trusted utilitarian elite objectionably secretive, undemocratic, and elitist.

Utilitarians might reply that rule-utilitarianism can be more public than act-utilitarianism, since the people can be trusted as competent to follow basic and straightforward rules such as "Do not kill" and "Keep your promises." But we have already seen (in section 6) numerous reasons to doubt that rule-utilitarianism can ultimately remain distinct enough from act-utilitarianism, or to doubt that rule-utilitarianism is acceptable.

But Objection 11 fails because it accepts too uncritically the commonsense morality of public notification and use of moral rules. Indeed, it seems uncertain whether this is a requirement of commonsense morality at all. No less a champion of democracy than Winston Churchill insisted that "democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."¹⁶ And Churchill's wisdom here is commonly quoted and accepted. So perhaps a utilitarian form of government would improve upon democracy and all the other forms of government tried so far.

C. Conclusion

In conclusion, though I reject some of the objections to utilitarianism that I still found to be worth presenting (Objections 1, 2, 10, and 11), the remaining objections collectively have enough force to convince me and many others to reject

utilitarianism. But I can hardly rule out the development of a new version of utilitarianism that will dodge or withstand any silver bullets fired at utilitarianism here. I encourage those who wish to try to develop a new and improved utilitarianism.¹⁷

Notes

1. Quoted in J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (many editions), chapter 5.
2. Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point Of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics*, abr. ed. (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 147; unabridged edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 307.
3. Raymond D. Gastil, "The Moral Right Of The Majority To Restrict Obscenity And Pornography Through Law," 86 *Ethics* (1976): 231-40, pp. 235-36; reprinted in John Arthur and William H. Shaw, eds., *Readings In Philosophy Of Law* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), p. 572.
4. Robert E. Goodin, "Utility And The Good," in Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion To Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 243.
5. Richard Mervyn Hare, *Freedom And Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 130.
6. Jonathan Harrison, "Rule Utilitarianism and Cumulative-Effect Utilitarianism," in Wesley E. Cooper, Kai Nielsen, and Steven C. Patten, eds., *New Essays on John Stuart Mill and Utilitarianism* (Guelph, Ont.: Canadian Association For Publishing In Philosophy, 1979), p. 22.
7. Harrison, "Rule-Utilitarianism and Cumulative-Effect Utilitarianism," p. 24.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
9. Hare was apparently the first in print to argue that act- and rule-utilitarianism are extensionally equivalent, though David Lyons shortly thereafter published a similar argument with much more detail and logical rigor. See, Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 131 and David Lyons, *The Forms And Limits Of Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).
10. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, p. 130.
11. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State & Utopia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 42-45. Compare the idea of the experience machine with Woody Allen's 'orgasmitron' in his film " Sleeper " from