Utilitarianism
John Stuart Mill
Kinds of Moral Theory

Character → Motive → Action → Effects

Aristotle | Kant | Rules | Utilitarianism
## Moral Calculus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Pleasure</th>
<th>Pain</th>
<th>Difference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>P(A)</td>
<td>L(A)</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>P(Z)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>B</td>
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Calculating

Better

Option 1

Option 2

Option 3

Option 4

Worse

What should I do?

What must I do?

Supererogatory acts:
Can I go above and beyond the call of duty?
Calculating

• Comparing effects
  • pleasures vs. pains
  • near and long-term pleasures and pains (discount rate)
  • interpersonal comparisons
  • ordinal to cardinal scale—intensities
  • kinds of pleasures
Utilitarianism

You ought to do it.

Too narrow? (False negative)

Too broad? (False positive)
Carlyle’s Objection

- Thomas Carlyle: “Pig philosophy!”
- Utilitarianism: good = feeling good
Mill’s 1830s response

- The goal is to maximize the good for mankind as a species

- This has two implications:
  - I can best do that by promoting my own good; we are all best off when each tends his own
  - I have reason to develop my capacities, my talents, and my intellect; they produce benefits for mankind, not just for me
Qualities of pleasures

- Mill: pleasures differ in quality as well as quantity

- “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.”

- We are capable of better pleasures than pigs are
Judging Quality

- Which pleasures are higher?
- See what the competent judges prefer
- Who is competent to judge? Those with experience of both
Intellectual Pleasures
Social Pleasures
Sensual Pleasures
Complex Pleasures
Aesthetic Pleasures
Kinesthetic Pleasures
Qualities of Pleasure

- Intellectual
- Social
- Sensual
Virtue

- Even if higher pleasures were not more intrinsically valuable, utilitarianism would not be pig philosophy

- Higher pleasures $\rightarrow$ virtues $\rightarrow$ benefits for others

- Mill affirms his 1830s answers
Bentham v. Mill

- Bentham agrees that pleasures differ in quality: “In regard to well-being, quality as well as quantity requires to be taken into account.”

- He has an entire chapter on kinds of pleasures
Bentham v. Mill

- But Bentham thinks *you* are the most competent judge of quality for *you*. To each his own.
- “Quantity depends upon general sensibility, sensibility to pleasure and pain in general; quality upon particular sensibility: upon a man's being more sensible to pleasure or pain from this or that source, than to ditto from this or that other.”
Bentham on Liberty

- I can know quality for me by reflection
- But I can judge qualities for others only by what they say and do
- So, each can judge best for him/herself: “every man is a better judge of what is conducive to his own well-being than any other man can be.”
Mill on Liberty

- Harm principle:
- The only justification for restricting liberty is harm to others
- Self-regarding actions: sphere of liberty
- We ought to be free to do what we please so long as we don’t violate someone else’s rights
Time

• Won’t we spend much of our lives calculating?

• How can we tell when we shouldn’t calculate? Do we have to calculate about that?

• How can we tell when we’ve calculated enough?
Committees
Mill on Rules

- Principle of utility justifies acts
- It need not be a motivation or even a practical test
- We apply it by “secondary principles,” common sense moral rules
- We justify these rules by utility
- We appeal to the principle of utility only when secondary principles conflict
Practical Test

- That means that the principle of utility plays two roles:
  - It justifies secondary principles, which serve as the practical test of morality
  - It resolves conflicts between them
Secondary Principles

- W. D. Ross offers a list of principles:
  - Keep your promises
  - Correct your mistakes
  - Show gratitude for kindnesses
  - Promote justice
  - Help others
  - Improve yourself
  - Don’t harm others
Prima Facie Duties

- These principles hold *ceteris paribus* (other things being equal)

- They tell us what our prima facie duties are—what we should do if no other moral considerations intervene

- What if others do intervene?

- Mill: Calculate!

- Ross: Which is more of a duty?
Act v. Rule Utilitarianism

*Act utilitarianism* (Bentham): an act is right if it maximizes good

- Utility $\rightarrow$ act

*Rule utilitarianism* (Maimonides): an act is right if it accords with the rules that maximize good

- Utility $\rightarrow$ Rules $\rightarrow$ Act
- Disagree when a rule conflicts with utility
Breaking Rules

- What if we can do better by breaking a (good) rule?
- Don’t break it!
- Rules essential to moral thought
- We are tempted to break rules for our own advantage
- We’ll usually go wrong
- Moral chaos
Interpreting Mill

- Is Mill an act or rule-utilitarian?
- His greatest happiness principle speaks of acts
- But he stresses secondary principles
Mill: Breaking Rules

- Letter to John Venn:
  - Advocates act utilitarianism
  - But agrees with Maimonides
  - If we break a rule, we’ll usually go wrong
  - So, better to obey the rule
Mill: Acts and Rules

- Act utilitarianism is right, but act as a rule utilitarian
- Act utilitarianism is theoretically correct: it tells us what makes right acts right
- But rule utilitarianism is a better practical test
Tradeoffs

• Bentham argues for utilitarianism as a method for resolving conflicts and making tradeoffs

• But does it resolve conflicts in the right way?
Conflicts

• Fort Sensible
• The Accidental Tourist
• The Gladiators
• The Healthy Patient
• The Trolley Problem
Fort Sensible
The Accidental Tourist
The Healthy Patient
The Trolley Problem
The Trolley Problem
The Trolley Problem
The Trolley Problem
The Trolley Problem
EVER HEARD OF THE TROLLEY PROBLEM?
NO. WHAT IS IT?

A TROLLEY IS BARRELING TOWARDS FIVE HELPLESS PEOPLE ON THE TRACKS. YOU CAN PULL A LEVER TO DIRECT IT ONTO ANOTHER TRACK, BUT-

CAN I REACH THE LEVER WITHOUT GETTING UP?
WAIT, I'M NOT IN THIS SCENARIO, HOW BUSY AM I?

I GUESS I FORGOT WHO I WAS TALKING TO.
FOR A DOLLAR, I'LL PROMISE TO PULL THE LEVER IF ONE OF THE FIVE PEOPLE IS YOU.
Utility vs. Kant and Aristotle

• What if I can produce better results by using someone as a mere means—e.g., by deceiving, coercing, exploiting, or killing them?

• What if I can produce better results by acting contrary to virtue—in a way a virtuous person would not act?
Possible Response

- There could be such a case, but we could never know we’re in one

- We don’t know the consequences clearly enough
Possible Response

• There could be such a case, but we could never know we’re in one

• We don’t know the consequences clearly enough
  
  • Bluffs

  • Retaliation

  • Long-term effects: encouraging bad behavior; credibility....