



## Consequentialist Theories: Maximize the Good

There is something in consequentialist moral theories that we find appealing, something simple and commonsensical that jibes with everyday moral experience. This attractive core is the notion that right actions must produce the best balance of good over evil. Never mind (for now) how *good* and *evil* are defined. The essential concern is how much good can result from actions performed. In this chapter, we examine the plausibility of this consequentialist maxim and explore how it is worked out in its two most influential theories: ethical egoism and utilitarianism.

### ETHICAL EGOISM

Ethical egoism is the theory that the right action is the one that advances one's own best interests. It is a provocative doctrine, in part because it forces us to consider two opposing attitudes in ourselves. On the one hand, we tend to view selfish or flagrantly self-interested behavior as wicked, or at least troubling. Self-love is bad love. We frown on people who trample others in life to get to the head of the line. On the other hand, sometimes we want to look out for number one, to give priority to our own needs and desires. We think, If we do not help ourselves, who will? Self-love is good love.

Ethical egoism says that one's only moral duty is to promote the most favorable balance of good over evil for oneself. Each person must put his or her own welfare first. Advancing the interests of others is part of this moral equation only if it helps promote one's own good. Yet this extreme self-

interest is not necessarily selfishness. Selfish acts advance one's own interests regardless of how others are affected. Self-interested acts promote one's own interests but not necessarily to the detriment of others. To further your own interests you may actually find yourself helping others. To gain some advantage, you may perform actions that are decidedly unselfish.

Just as we cannot equate ethical egoism with selfishness, neither can we assume it is synonymous with self-indulgence or recklessness. An ethical egoist does not necessarily do whatever she desires to do or whatever gives her the most immediate pleasure. She does what is in her best interests, and instant gratification may not be in her best interests. She may want to spend all her money at the casino or work eighteen hours a day, but over the long haul doing so may be disastrous for her. Even ethical egoists have to consider the long-term effects of their actions. They also have to take into account their interactions with others. At least most of the time, egoists are probably better off if they cooperate with others, develop reciprocal relationships, and avoid actions that antagonize people in their community or society.

Ethical egoism comes in two forms—one applying the doctrine to individual *acts* and one to relevant *rules*. **Act-egoism** says that to determine right action, you must apply the egoistic principle to individual acts. Act A is preferable to Act B because it promotes your self-interest better. **Rule-egoism** says that to determine right action, you must see if an act falls under a rule that if consistently fol-

lowed would maximize your self-interest. Act A is preferable to Act B because it falls under a rule that maximizes your self-interest better than any other relevant rule applying to Act B. An ethical egoist can define self-interest in various ways. The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.), a famous ethical egoist from whose name we derive the words *epicure* and *epicurean*, gave a hedonist answer: The greatest good is pleasure, and the greatest evil, pain. The duty of a good ethical egoist is to maximize pleasure for oneself. (Contrary to legend, Epicurus thought that wanton overindulgence in the delights of the senses was not in one's best interests. He insisted that the best pleasures were those of the contemplative life and that extravagant pleasures such as drunkenness and gluttony eventually lead to misery.) Other egoistic notions of the greatest good include self-actualization (fulfilling one's potential), security and material success, satisfaction of desires, acquisition of power, and the experience of happiness.

To many people, ethical egoism may sound alien, especially if they have heard all their lives about the noble virtue of altruism and the evils of self-centeredness. But consider that self-interest is a pillar on which the economic system of capitalism is built. In a capitalist system, self-interest is supposed to drive people to seek advantages for themselves in the marketplace, compelling them to compete against each other to build a better mousetrap at a lower price. Economists argue that the result of this clash of self-interests is a better, more prosperous society.

### ***Applying the Theory***

Suppose Rosa is a successful executive at a large media corporation, and she has her eye on a vice president's position, which has just become vacant. Vincent, another successful executive in the company, also wants the VP job. Management wants to fill the vacancy as soon as possible, and they are trying to decide between the two most qualified candidates—Rosa and Vincent. One day Rosa dis-

covers some documents left near a photocopier and quickly realizes that they belong to Vincent. One of them is an old memo from the president of a company where Vincent used to work. In it, the president lambastes Vincent for botching an important company project. Rosa knows that despite what she reads in the memo, Vincent has had an exemplary professional career in which he has managed most of his projects extremely well. In fact, she believes that the two of them are about equal in professional skills and accomplishments. She also knows that if management saw the memo, they would almost certainly choose her over Vincent for the VP position. She figures that Vincent probably left the documents there by mistake and would soon return to retrieve them. Impulsively, she makes a copy of the memo for herself.

Now she is confronted with a moral choice. Let us suppose that she has only three options. First, she can destroy her copy of the memo and forget about the whole incident. Second, she can discredit Vincent by showing it to management, thereby securing the VP slot for herself. Third, she can achieve the same result by discrediting Vincent surreptitiously: she can simply leave a copy where management is sure to discover it. Let us also assume that she is an act-egoist who defines her self-interest as self-actualization. Self-actualization for her means developing into the most powerful, most highly respected executive in her profession while maximizing the virtues of loyalty and honesty.

So by the lights of her act-egoism what should Rosa do? Which choice is in her best interests? Option one is neutral regarding her self-interest. If she destroys her copy of the memo, she will neither gain nor lose an advantage for herself. Option two is more complicated. If she overtly discredits Vincent, she will probably land the VP spot—a feat that fits nicely with her desire to become a powerful executive. But such a barefaced sabotaging of someone else's career would likely trouble management, and their loss of some respect for

Rosa would impede future advancement in her career. They may also come to distrust her. Rosa's backstabbing would also probably erode the trust and respect of her subordinates (those who report to her). If so, their performance may suffer, and any deficiencies in Rosa's subordinates would reflect on her leadership skills. Over time, she may be able to regain the respect of management through dazzling successes in her field, but the respect and trust of others may be much harder to regain. Option two involves the unauthorized, deceitful use of personal information against another person—not an action that encourages the virtue of honesty in Rosa. In fact, her dishonesty may weaken her moral resolve and make similar acts of deceit more probable. Like option two, option three would likely secure the VP job for Rosa. But because the deed is surreptitious, it would probably not diminish the respect and trust of others. There is a low probability, however, that Rosa's secret would eventually be uncovered—especially if Vincent suspects Rosa, which is likely. If she is found out, the damage done to her reputation (and possibly her career) might be greater than that caused by the more up-front tactic of option two. Also like option two, option three might weaken the virtue of honesty in Rosa's character.

Given this situation and Rosa's brand of act-egoism, she should probably go with option three—but only if the risk of being found out is extremely low. Option three promotes her self-interest dramatically by securing the coveted job at a relatively low cost (a possible erosion of virtue). Option two would also land the job but at very high cost—a loss of other people's trust and respect, a possible decrease in her chances for career advancement, damage to her professional reputation, and a likely lessening of a virtue critical to Rosa's self-actualization (honesty).

If Rosa believes that the risks to her career and character involved in options two and three are too high, she should probably choose option one.

This choice would not promote her best interests, but it would not diminish them either.

Would Rosa's action be any different if judged from the perspective of rule-egoism? Suppose Rosa, like many other ethical egoists, thinks that her actions should be guided by this rule (or something like it): People should be honest in their dealings with others—that is, except in insignificant matters (white lies), they should not lie to others or mislead them. She believes that adhering to this prohibition against dishonesty is in her best interests. The rule, however, would disallow both options two and three, for they involve significant deception. Only option one would be left. But if obeying the rule would lead to a major setback for her interests, Rosa might decide to ignore it in this case (or reject it altogether as contrary to the spirit of ethical egoism). If so, she might have to fall back to act-egoism and decide in favor of option three.

### *Evaluating the Theory*

Is ethical egoism a plausible moral theory? Let us find out by examining arguments in its favor and applying the moral criteria of adequacy.

The primary argument for ethical egoism depends heavily on a scientific theory known as **psychological egoism**, the view that the motive for all our actions is self-interest. Whatever we do, we do because we want to promote our own welfare. Psychological egoism, we are told, is simply a description of the true nature of our motivations. We are, in short, born to look out for number one.

Putting psychological egoism to good use, the ethical egoist reasons as follows: We can never be morally obligated to perform an action that we cannot possibly do. This is just an obvious fact about morality. Since we are *not able* to prevent a hurricane from blasting across a coastal city, we are *not morally obligated* to prevent it. Likewise, since we are not able to perform an action except out of self-interest (the claim of psychological egoism), we are not morally obligated to perform an action unless motivated by self-interest. That is,

we are morally obligated to do only what our self-interest motivates us to do. Here is the argument stated more formally:

1. We are not able to perform an action except out of self-interest (psychological egoism).
2. We are not morally obligated to perform an action unless motivated by self-interest.
3. Therefore, we are morally obligated to do only what our self-interest motivates us to do.

Notice that even if psychological egoism is true, this argument does not establish that an action is right if and only if it promotes one's self-interest (the claim of ethical egoism). But it does demonstrate that an action cannot be right unless it at least promotes one's self-interest. To put it another way, an action that does not advance one's own welfare cannot be right.

Is psychological egoism true? Many people think it is and offer several arguments in its favor. One line of reasoning is that psychological egoism is true because experience shows that all our actions are in fact motivated by self-interest. All our actions—including seemingly altruistic ones—are performed to gain some benefit for ourselves. This argument, however, is far from conclusive. Sometimes people do perform altruistic acts because doing so is in their best interests. Smith may contribute to charity because such generosity furthers his political ambitions. Jones may do volunteer work for the Red Cross because it looks good on her résumé. But people also seem to do things that are *not* motivated by self-interest. They sometimes risk their lives by rushing into a burning building to rescue a complete stranger. They may impair their health by donating a kidney to prevent one of their children from dying. Explanations that appeal to self-interest in such cases seem implausible. Moreover, people often have self-destructive habits (for example, drinking excessively and driving recklessly)—habits that are unlikely to be in anyone's best interests.

Some ethical egoists may argue in a slightly different vein: People get satisfaction (or happiness or pleasure) from what they do, including their so-called unselfish or altruistic acts. Therefore, they perform unselfish or altruistic actions because doing so gives them satisfaction. A man saves a child from a burning building because he wants the emotional satisfaction that comes from saving a life. Our actions, no matter how we characterize them, are all about self-interest.

This argument is based on a conceptual confusion. It says that we perform selfless acts to achieve satisfaction. Satisfaction is the object of the whole exercise. But if we experience satisfaction in performing an action, that does not show that our goal in performing the action is satisfaction. A much more plausible account is that we desire something other than satisfaction and then experience satisfaction as a result of getting what we desired. Consider, for example, our man who saves the child from a fire. He rescues the child and feels satisfaction—but he could not have experienced that satisfaction unless he already had a desire to save the child or cared what happened to her. If he did not have such a desire or care about her, how could he have derived any satisfaction from his actions? To experience satisfaction he had to have a desire for something other than his own satisfaction. The moral of the story is that satisfaction is the result of getting what we want—not the object of our desires.

This view fits well with our own experience. Most often when we act according to some purpose, we are not focused on, or aware of, our satisfaction. We concentrate on obtaining the real object of our efforts, and when we succeed, we then feel satisfaction.

The philosopher Joel Feinberg makes a similar point about the pursuit of happiness. He asks us to imagine a person, Jones, who has no desire for much of anything—except happiness. Jones has no interest in knowledge for its own sake, the beauty of nature, art and literature, sports, crafts,



### Can Ethical Egoism Be Advocated?

Some critics of ethical egoism say that it is a very strange theory because its adherents cannot urge others to become ethical egoists! The philosopher Theodore Schick Jr. makes the point:

Even if ethical egoism did provide necessary and sufficient conditions for an action's being right, it would be a peculiar sort of ethical theory, for its adherents couldn't consistently advocate it. Suppose that someone came to an ethical egoist for moral advice. If the ethical egoist wanted to do what is in his best interest, he would not tell his client to do what is in her best interest because her interests might conflict with his. Rather, he would tell her to do what is in his best interest.

Such advice has been satirized on national TV. Al Franken, a former writer for *Saturday Night Live* and author of *Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations*, proclaimed on a number of *Saturday Night Live* shows in the early 1980s that whereas the 1970s were known as the "me" decade, the 1980s were going to be known as the "Al Franken" decade. So whenever anyone was faced with a difficult decision, the individual should ask herself, "How can I most benefit Al Franken?"\*

\*Theodore Schick Jr., in *Doing Philosophy: An Introduction through Thought Experiments*, by Schick and Lewis Vaughn, 2nd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 327.

or business. But Jones does have "an overwhelming passion for, a complete preoccupation with, his own happiness. The one desire of his life is to be happy."<sup>1</sup> The irony is that using this approach, Jones will *not* find happiness. He cannot pursue happiness directly and expect to find it. To achieve happiness, he must pursue other aims whose pursuit yields happiness as a by-product. We must conclude that it is not the case that our only motivation for our actions is the desire for happiness (or satisfaction or pleasure).

These reflections show that psychological egoism is a dubious theory, and if we construe self-interest as satisfaction, pleasure, or happiness, the theory seems false. Still, some may not give up the argument from experience (mentioned earlier), insisting that when properly interpreted, all our actions (including those that seem purely altruistic or unselfish) can be shown to be motivated by self-interest. All the counterexamples that seem to

suggest that psychological egoism is false actually are evidence that it is true. Smith's contributing to charity may look altruistic, but he is really trying to impress a woman he would like to date. Jones's volunteer work at the Red Cross may seem unselfish, but she is just trying to cultivate some business contacts. Every counterexample can be reinterpreted to support the theory.

Critics have been quick to charge that this way of defending psychological egoism is a mistake. It renders the theory untestable and useless. It ensures that no evidence could possibly count against it, and therefore it does not tell us anything about self-interested actions. Anything we say about such actions would be consistent with the theory. Any theory that is so uninformative could not be used to support another theory—including ethical egoism.

So far we have found the arguments for ethical egoism ineffective. Now we can ask another question: Are there any good arguments *against* ethical egoism? This is where the moral criteria of adequacy come in.

Recall that an important first step in evaluating a moral theory (or any other kind of theory) is to determine if it meets the minimum require-

<sup>1</sup>Joel Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism," in *Moral Philosophy: Selected Readings*, ed. George Sher (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 11–12.

ment of coherence, or internal consistency. As it turns out, some critics of ethical egoism have brought the charge of logical or practical inconsistency against the theory. But in general these criticisms seem to fall short of a knockout blow to ethical egoism. Devising counterarguments that can undercut the criticisms seems to be a straightforward business. Let us assume, then, that ethical egoism is in fact eligible for evaluation using the criteria of adequacy.

We begin with Criterion 1, consistency with considered judgments. A major criticism of ethical egoism is that it is *not* consistent with many of our considered moral judgments—judgments that seem highly plausible and commonsensical. Specifically, ethical egoism seems to sanction actions that we would surely regard as abominable. Suppose a young man visits his elderly, bedridden father. When he sees that no one else is around, he uses a pillow to smother the old man in order to collect on his life insurance. Suppose also that the action is in the son's best interests; it will cause not the least bit of unpleasant feelings in him; and the crime will remain his own terrible secret. According to ethical egoism, this heinous act is morally right. The son did his duty.

An ethical egoist might object to this line by saying that *refraining* from committing evil acts is actually endorsed by ethical egoism—one's best interests are served by refraining. You should not murder or steal, for example, because it might encourage others to do the same to you, or it might undermine trust, security, or cooperation in society, which would not be in your best interests. For these reasons, you should obey the law or the rules of conventional morality (as the rule-egoist might do).

But following the rules is clearly not always in one's best interests. Sometimes committing a wicked act really does promote one's own welfare. In the case of the murdering son, no one will seek revenge for the secret murder, cooperation and trust in society will not be affected, and the mur-

derer will suffer no psychological torments. There seems to be no downside here—but the son's rewards for committing the deed will be great. Consistently looking out for one's own welfare sometimes requires rule violations and exceptions. In fact, some argue that the interests of ethical egoists may be best served when they urge everyone else to obey the rules while they themselves secretly break them.

If ethical egoism does conflict with our considered judgments, it is questionable at best. But it has been accused of another defect as well: it fails Criterion 2, consistency with our moral experiences.

One aspect of morality is so fundamental that we may plausibly view it as a basic fact of the moral life: moral impartiality, or treating equals equally. We know that in our dealings with the world, we are supposed to take into account the treatment of others as well as that of ourselves. The moral life is lived with the wider world in mind. We must give all persons their due and treat all equals equally, for in the moral sense we are all equals. Each person is presumed to have the same rights—and to have interests that are just as important—as everyone else, unless we have good reason for thinking otherwise. If one person is qualified for a job, and another person is equally qualified, we would be guilty of discrimination if we hired one and not the other based solely on race, sex, skin color, or ancestry. These factors are not morally relevant. People who do treat equals unequally in such ways are known as racists, sexists, bigots, and the like. Probably the most serious charge against ethical egoism is that it discriminates against people in the same fashion. It arbitrarily treats the interests of some people (oneself) as more important than the interests of all others (the rest of the world)—even though there is no morally relevant difference between the two.

The failure of ethical egoism to treat equals equally seems a serious defect in the theory. It conflicts with a major component of our moral



### QUICK REVIEW

**act-egoism**—The theory that to determine right action, you must apply the egoistic principle to individual acts.

**rule-egoism**—The theory that to determine right action, you must see if an act falls under a rule that if consistently followed would maximize your self-interest.

**psychological egoism**—The view that the motive for all our actions is self-interest.

existence. For many critics, this single defect is enough reason to reject the theory.

Recall that Criterion 3 is usefulness in moral problem solving. Some philosophers argue that ethical egoism fails this standard because the theory seems to lead to contradictory advice or conflicting actions. If real, this problem would constitute a significant failing of the theory. But these criticisms depend on controversial assumptions about ethical egoism or morality in general, so we will not dwell on them here. Our analysis of ethical egoism's problems using the first two criteria should be sufficient to raise serious doubts about the theory.

## UTILITARIANISM

Are you a utilitarian? To find out, consider the following scenario: After years of research, a medical scientist—Dr. X—realizes that she is just one step away from developing a cure for all known forms of heart disease. Such a breakthrough would save hundreds of thousands of lives—perhaps millions. The world could finally be rid of heart attacks, strokes, heart failure, and the like, a feat as monumental as the eradication of deadly smallpox. That one last step in her research, however, is tech-

nologically feasible but morally problematic. It involves the killing of a single healthy human being to microscopically examine the person's heart tissue just seconds after the heart stops beating. The crucial piece of information needed to perfect the cure can be acquired only as just described; it cannot be extracted from the heart of a cadaver, an accident victim, someone suffering from a disease, or a person who has been dead for more than sixty seconds. Dr. X decides that the benefits to humanity from the cure are just too great to ignore. She locates a suitable candidate for the operation: a homeless man with no living relatives and no friends—someone who would not be missed. Through some elaborate subterfuge she manages to secretly do what needs to be done, killing the man and successfully performing the operation. She formulates the cure and saves countless lives. No one ever discovers how she obtained the last bit of information she needed to devise the cure, and she feels not the slightest guilt for her actions.

Did Dr. X do right? If you think so, then you may be a utilitarian. A utilitarian is more likely to believe that what Dr. X did was right, because it brought about consequences that were more good than bad. One man died, but countless others were saved. If you think that Dr. X did wrong, you may be a nonconsequentialist. A nonconsequentialist is likely to believe that Dr. X did wrong, because of the nature of her action: it was murder. The consequences are beside the point.

In this example, we get a hint of some of the elements that have made utilitarianism so attractive (and often controversial) to so many. First, whether or not we agree with the utilitarian view in this case, we can see that it has some plausibility. We tend to think it entirely natural to judge the morality of an action by the effects that it has on the people involved. To decide if we do right or wrong, we want to know whether the consequences of our actions are good or bad, whether

greatest good over  
greatest sum

they bring pleasure or pain, whether they enhance or diminish the welfare of ourselves and others. Second, the utilitarian formula for distinguishing right and wrong actions seems exceptionally straightforward. We simply calculate which action among several possible actions has the best balance of good over evil, everyone considered—and act accordingly. Moral choice is apparently reduced to a single moral principle and simple math. Third, at least sometimes, we all seem to be utilitarians. We may tell a white lie because the truth would hurt someone’s feelings. We may break a promise because keeping it causes more harm than good. We may want a criminal punished not because he broke the law but because the punishment may deter him from future crimes. We justify such departures from conventional morality on the grounds that they produce better consequences.

Utilitarianism is one of the most influential moral theories in history. The English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) was the first to fill out the theory in detail, and the English philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (1806–73) developed it further. In their hands utilitarianism became a powerful instrument of social reform. It provided a rationale for promoting women’s rights, improving the treatment of prisoners, advocating animal rights, and aiding the poor—all radical ideas in Bentham’s and Mill’s day. In the twenty-first century, the theory still has a strong effect on moral and policy decision making in many areas, including health care, criminal justice, and government.

Classic utilitarianism—the kind of act-utilitarianism formulated by Bentham—is the simplest form of the theory. It affirms the principle that the right action is the one that directly produces the best balance of happiness over unhappiness for all concerned. Happiness is an intrinsic good—the *only* intrinsic good. What matters most is how much net happiness comes directly from performing an action (as opposed to following a

rule that applies to such actions). To determine the right action, we need only compute the amount of happiness that each possible action generates and choose the one that generates the most. There are no rules to take into account—just the single, simple utilitarian principle. Each set of circumstances calling for a moral choice is unique, requiring a new calculation of the varying consequences of possible actions.

Bentham called the utilitarian principle the **principle of utility** and asserted that all our actions can be judged by it. (Mill called it the **greatest happiness principle**.) As Bentham says,

By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness. . . .

By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, (all this in the present case comes to the same thing) or (what comes again to the same thing) to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered[.]<sup>2</sup>

The principle of utility, of course, makes the theory consequentialist. The emphasis on happiness or pleasure makes it hedonistic, for happiness is the only intrinsic good.

As you can see, there is a world of difference between the moral focus of utilitarianism (in all its forms) and that of ethical egoism. The point of ethical egoism is to promote one’s own good. An underlying tenet of utilitarianism is that you should promote the good of *everyone concerned* and that everyone *counts equally*. When deliberating

<sup>2</sup>Jeremy Bentham, “Of the Principle of Utility,” in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 1–7.



about which action to perform, you must take into account your own happiness as well as that of everyone else who will be affected by your decision—and no one is to be given privileged status. Such evenhandedness requires a large measure of impartiality, a quality that plays a role in every plausible moral theory. Mill says it best:

[T]he happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.<sup>3</sup>

In classic act-utilitarianism, knowing how to tote up the amount of utility, or happiness, generated by various actions is essential. Bentham's answer to this requirement is the *hedonic calculus*, which quantifies happiness and handles the necessary calculations. His approach is straightforward in conception but complicated in the details: For each possible action in a particular situation, determine the total amount of happiness or unhappiness produced by it for one individual (that is, the *net* happiness—happiness minus unhappiness). Gauge the level of happiness with seven basic characteristics such as intensity, duration, and fecundity (how likely the pleasure or pain is to be followed by more pleasure or pain). Repeat this process for all individuals involved and sum their happiness or unhappiness to arrive at an overall net happiness for that particular action. Repeat for each possible action. The action with the best score (the most happiness or least unhappiness) is the morally right one.

Notice that in this arrangement, only the *total amount* of net happiness for each action matters. How the happiness is distributed among the persons involved does not figure into the calculations. This means that an action that affects ten

people and produces one hundred units of happiness is to be preferred over an action that affects those same ten people but generates only fifty units of happiness—even if most of the one hundred units go to just one individual, and the fifty units divide equally among the ten. The aggregate of happiness is decisive; its distribution is not. Classic utilitarianism, though, does ask that any given amount of happiness be spread among as many people as possible—thus the utilitarian slogan “The greatest happiness for the greatest number.”

Both Bentham and Mill define happiness as pleasure. In Mill's words,

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.<sup>4</sup>

They differ, though, on the nature of happiness and how it should be measured. Bentham thinks that happiness varies only in quantity—different actions produce different amounts of happiness. To judge the intensity, duration, or fecundity of happiness is to calculate its quantity. Mill contends that happiness can vary in quantity and quality. There are lower pleasures, such as eating, drinking, and having sex, and there are higher pleasures, such as pursuing knowledge, appreciating beauty, and creating art. The higher pleasures are superior to the lower ones. The lower ones can be intense and enjoyable, but the higher ones are qualitatively better and more fulfilling. In this scheme, a person enjoying a mere taste of a higher pleasure may be closer to the moral ideal than a hedonistic glutton who gorges on lower pleasures. Thus Mill declared, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”<sup>5</sup> In Ben-

<sup>3</sup>John Stuart Mill, “What Utilitarianism Is,” in *Utilitarianism*, 7th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1879), Chapter II.

<sup>4</sup>Mill, Chapter II.

<sup>5</sup>Mill, Chapter II.

tham's view, the glutton—who acquires a larger quantity of pleasure—would be closer to the ideal.

The problem for Mill is to justify his hierarchical ranking of the various pleasures. He tries to do so by appealing to what the majority prefers—that is, the majority of people who have experienced both the lower and higher pleasures. But this approach probably will not help, because people can differ drastically in how they rank pleasures. It is possible, for example, that a majority of people who have experienced a range of pleasures would actually disagree with Mill's rankings. In fact, any effort to devise such rankings using the principle of utility seems unlikely to succeed.

Many critics have argued that the idea of defining right action in terms of some intrinsic nonmoral good (whether pleasure, happiness, or anything else) is seriously problematic. Attempts to devise such a definition have been fraught with complications—a major one being that people have different ideas about what things are intrinsically valuable. Some utilitarians have tried to sidestep these difficulties by insisting that maximizing utility means maximizing people's *preferences*, whatever they are. This formulation seems to avoid some of the difficulties just mentioned but falls prey to another: some people's preferences may be clearly objectionable when judged by almost any moral standard, whether utilitarian or nonconsequentialist. Some people, after all, have ghastly preferences—preferences, say, for torturing children or killing innocent people for fun. Some critics say that repairing this preference utilitarianism to avoid sanctioning objectionable actions seems unlikely without introducing some nonutilitarian moral principles such as justice, rights, and obligations.

Like act-utilitarianism, rule-utilitarianism aims at the greatest good for all affected individuals, but it maintains that we travel an indirect route to that goal. In rule-utilitarianism, the morally right action is not the one that directly brings about the greatest good but the one covered by a rule that, if followed consistently, produces the great-

est good for all. In act-utilitarianism, we must examine each action to see how much good (or evil) it generates. Rule-utilitarianism would have us first determine what rule an action falls under, then see if that rule would likely maximize utility if everyone followed it. In effect, the rule-utilitarian asks, "What if everyone followed this rule?"

An act-utilitarian tries to judge the rightness of actions by the consequences they produce, occasionally relying on "rules of thumb" (such as "Usually we should not harm innocents") merely to save time. A rule-utilitarian, however, tries to follow every valid rule—even if doing so may not maximize utility in a specific situation.

In our example featuring Dr. X and the cure for heart disease, an act-utilitarian might compare the net happiness produced by performing the lethal operation and by not performing it, opting finally for the former because it maximizes happiness. A rule-utilitarian, on the other hand, would consider what moral rules seem to apply to the situation. One rule might be "It is permissible to conduct medical procedures or experiments on people without their full knowledge and consent in order to substantially advance medical science." Another one might say "Do not conduct medical procedures or experiments on people without their full knowledge and consent." If the first rule is generally followed, happiness is not likely to be maximized in the long run. Widespread adherence to this rule would encourage medical scientists and physicians to murder patients for the good of science. Such practices would outrage people and cause them to fear and distrust science and the medical profession, leading to the breakdown of the entire health care system and most medical research. But if the second rule is consistently adhered to, happiness is likely to be maximized over the long haul. Trust in physicians and medical scientists would be maintained, and promising research could continue as long as it was conducted with the patient's consent. The right

action, then, is for Dr. X *not* to perform the gruesome operation.

### ***Applying the Theory***

Let us apply utilitarianism to another type of case. Imagine that for more than a year a terrorist has been carrying out devastating attacks in a developing country, killing hundreds of innocent men, women, and children. He seems unstoppable. He always manages to elude capture. In fact, because of his stealth, the expert assistance of a few accomplices, and his support among the general population, he will most likely never be captured or killed. The authorities have no idea where he hides or where he will strike next. But they are sure that he will go on killing indefinitely. They have tried every tactic they know to put an end to

the slaughter, but it goes on and on. Finally, as a last resort, the chief of the nation's antiterrorist police orders the arrest of the terrorist's family—a wife and seven children. The chief intends to kill the wife and three of the children right away (to show that he is serious), then threaten to kill the remaining four unless the terrorist turns himself in. There is no doubt that the chief will make good on his intentions, and there is excellent reason to believe that the terrorist will indeed turn himself in rather than allow his remaining children to be executed.

Suppose that the chief has only two options: (1) refrain from murdering the terrorist's family and continue with the usual antiterrorist tactics (which have only a tiny chance of being successful); or (2) kill the wife and three of the children



### **Peter Singer, Utilitarian**

The distinguished philosopher Peter Singer is arguably the most famous (and controversial) utilitarian of recent years. Many newspaper and magazine articles have been written about him, and many people have declared their agreement with, or vociferous opposition to, his views. This is how one magazine characterizes Singer and his ideas:

*The New Yorker* calls him "the most influential living philosopher." His critics call him "the most dangerous man in the world." Peter Singer, the De Camp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University's Center for Human Values, is most widely and controversially known for his view that animals have the same moral status as humans. . . .

Singer is perhaps the most thoroughgoing philosophical utilitarian since Jeremy Bentham. As such, he believes animals have rights because the relevant moral consideration is not whether a being can reason or talk but whether it can suffer. Jettisoning the traditional distinction between humans and nonhumans, Singer distinguishes

instead between persons and non-persons. Persons are beings that feel, reason, have self-awareness, and look forward to a future. Thus, fetuses and some very impaired human beings are not persons in his view and have a lesser moral status than, say, adult gorillas and chimpanzees.

Given such views, it was no surprise that anti-abortion activists and disability rights advocates loudly decried the Australian-born Singer's appointment at Princeton last year. Indeed, his language regarding the treatment of disabled human beings is at times appallingly similar to the eugenic arguments used by Nazi theorists concerning "life unworthy of life." Singer, however, believes that only parents, not the state, should have the power to make decisions about the fates of disabled infants.\*

\*Ronald Bailey, excerpts from "The Pursuit of Happiness, Peter Singer Interviewed by Ronald Bailey." *Reason Magazine*, December 2000. Reprinted with permission from Reason Magazine and Reason.com.

and threaten to kill the rest (a strategy with a very high chance of success). According to utilitarianism, which action is right?

As an act-utilitarian, the chief might reason like this: Action 2 would probably result in a net gain of happiness, everyone considered. Forcing the terrorist to turn himself in would save hundreds of lives. His killing spree would be over. The general level of fear and apprehension in the country might subside, and even the economy—which has slowed because of terrorism—might improve. The prestige of the terrorism chief and his agents might increase. On the downside, performing Action 2 would guarantee that four innocent people (and perhaps eight) would lose their lives, and the terrorist (whose welfare must also be included in the calculations) would be imprisoned for life or executed. In addition, many citizens would be disturbed by the killing of innocent people and the flouting of the law by the police, believing that these actions are wrong and likely to set a dangerous precedent. Over time, though, these misgivings may diminish. All things considered, then, Action 2 would probably produce more happiness than unhappiness. Action 1, on the other hand, maintains the status quo. It would allow the terrorist to continue murdering innocent people and spreading fear throughout the land—a decidedly unhappy result. It clearly would produce more unhappiness than happiness. Action 2, therefore, would produce the most happiness and would therefore be the morally right option.

As a rule-utilitarian, the chief might make a different choice. He would have to decide what rules would apply to the situation then determine which one, if consistently followed, would yield the most utility. Suppose he must decide between Rule 1 and Rule 2. Rule 1 says, “Do not kill innocent people in order to prevent terrorists from killing other innocent people.” Rule 2 says, “Killing innocent people is permissible if it helps to stop terrorist attacks.” The chief might deliberate as follows: We can be confident that consis-



## QUICK REVIEW

**principle of utility**—Bentham’s definition: “that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.”

**greatest happiness principle**—Mill’s definition: the principle that “holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”

tently following Rule 2 would have some dire consequences for society. Innocent people would be subject to arbitrary execution, civil rights would be regularly violated, the rule of law would be severely compromised, and trust in government would be degraded. In fact, adhering to Rule 2 might make people more fearful and less secure than terrorist attacks would; it would undermine the very foundations of a free society. In a particular case, killing innocent people to fight terror could possibly have more utility than not killing them. But whether such a strategy would be advantageous to society over the long haul is not at all certain. Consistently following Rule 1 would have none of these unfortunate consequences. If so, a society living according to Rule 1 would be better off than one adhering to Rule 2, and therefore the innocent should not be killed to stop the terrorist.

### **Evaluating the Theory**

Bentham and Mill do not offer ironclad arguments demonstrating that utilitarianism is the best moral theory. Mill, however, does try to show that the principle of utility is at least a plausible basis for the theory. After all, he says, humans by nature

desire happiness and nothing but happiness. If so, happiness is the standard by which we should judge human conduct, and therefore the principle of utility is the heart of morality. But this kind of moral argument is controversial, because it reasons from what *is* to what *should be*. In addition, as pointed out in the discussion of psychological egoism, the notion that happiness is our sole motivation is dubious.

What can we learn about utilitarianism by applying the moral criteria of adequacy? Let us begin with classic act-utilitarianism and deal with rule-utilitarianism later. We can also postpone discussion of the minimum requirement of coherence, because critics have been more inclined to charge rule-utilitarianism than act-utilitarianism with having significant internal inconsistencies.

If we begin with Criterion 1 (consistency with considered judgments), we run into what some have called act-utilitarianism's most serious problem: It conflicts with commonsense views about justice. Justice requires equal treatment of persons. It demands, for example, that goods such as happiness be distributed fairly, that we not harm one person to make several other persons happy. Utilitarianism says that everyone should be included in utility calculations, but it does not require that everyone get an equal share. Consider this famous scenario from the philosopher H. J. McCloskey:

While a utilitarian is visiting an area plagued by racial tension, a black man rapes a white woman. Race riots ensue, and white mobs roam the streets, beating and lynching black people as the police secretly condone the violence and do nothing to stop it. The utilitarian realizes that by giving false testimony, he could bring about the quick arrest and conviction of a black man whom he picks at random. As a result of this lie, the riots and the lynchings would stop, and innocent lives would be spared. As a utilitarian, he believes he has a duty to bear false witness to punish an innocent person.

If right actions are those that maximize happiness, then it seems that the utilitarian would be doing right by framing the innocent person. The innocent person, of course, would experience unhappiness (he might be sent to prison or even executed), but framing him would halt the riots and prevent many other innocent people from being killed, resulting in a net gain in overall happiness. Framing the innocent is unjust, though, and our considered moral judgments would be at odds with such an action. Here the commonsense idea of justice and the principle of utility collide. The conflict raises doubts about act-utilitarianism as a moral theory.

Here is another famous example:

This time you are to imagine yourself to be a surgeon, a truly great surgeon. Among other things you do, you transplant organs, and you are such a great surgeon that the organs you transplant always take. At the moment you have five patients who need organs. Two need one lung each, two need a kidney each, and the fifth needs a heart. If they do not get those organs today, they will all die; if you find organs for them today, you can transplant the organs and they will all live. But where to find the lungs, the kidneys, and the heart? The time is almost up when a report is brought to you that a young man who has just come into your clinic for his yearly check-up has exactly the right blood type, and is in excellent health. Lo, you have a possible donor. All you need do is cut him up and distribute his parts among the five who need them. You ask, but he says, "Sorry. I deeply sympathize, but no." Would it be morally permissible for you to operate anyway?<sup>6</sup>

This scenario involves the possible killing of an innocent person for the good of others. There seems little doubt that carrying out the murder and transplanting the victim's organs into five other people (and thus saving their lives) would maximize utility (assuming, of course, that the

<sup>6</sup>Judith Jarvis Thomson, "The Trolley Problem," in *Rights, Restitution, and Risk: Essays in Moral Theory*, ed. William Parent (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 95.

surgeon's deed would not become public, he or she suffered no untoward psychological effects, etc.). Compared with the happiness produced by doing the transplants, the unhappiness of the one unlucky donor seems minor. Therefore, according to act-utilitarianism, you (the surgeon) should commit the murder and do the transplants. But this choice appears to conflict with our considered moral judgments. Killing the healthy young man to benefit the five unhealthy ones seems unjust.

Look at one final case. Suppose a tsunami devastates a coastal area of Singapore. Relief agencies arrive on the scene to distribute food, shelter, and medical care to 100 tsunami victims—disaster aid that amounts to, say, 1,000 units of happiness. There are only two options for the distribution of the 1,000 units. Option A is to divide the 1,000 units equally among all 100 victims, supplying 10 units to each person. Option B is to give 901 units to one victim (who happens to be the richest man in the area) and 99 units to the remaining victims, providing 1 unit per person. Both options distribute the same amount of happiness to the victims—1,000 units. Following the dictates of act-utilitarianism, we would have to say that the two actions (options) have equal utility and so are equally right. But this seems wrong. It seems unjust to distribute the units of happiness so unevenly when all recipients are equals in all morally relevant respects. Like the other examples, this one suggests that act-utilitarianism may be an inadequate theory.

Detractors also make parallel arguments against the theory in many cases besides those involving injustice. A familiar charge is that act-utilitarianism conflicts with our commonsense judgments both about people's rights and about their obligations to one another. Consider first this scenario about rights: Mr. Y is a nurse in a care facility for the elderly. He tends to many bedridden patients who are in pain most of the time, are financial and emotional burdens to their families, and are not expected to live more than a few weeks. Despite

their misery, they do not wish for death; they want only to be free of pain. Mr. Y, an act-utilitarian, sees that there would be a lot more happiness in the world and less pain if these patients died sooner rather than later. He decides to take matters into his own hands, so he secretly gives them a drug that kills them quietly and painlessly. Their families and the facility staff feel enormous relief. No one will ever know what Mr. Y has done, and no one suspects foul play. He feels no guilt—only immense satisfaction knowing that he has helped make the world a better place.

If Mr. Y does indeed maximize happiness in this situation, then his action is right, according to act-utilitarianism. Yet most people would probably say that he violated the rights of his patients. The commonsense view is that people have certain rights that should not be violated merely to create a better balance of happiness over unhappiness.

Another typical criticism of act-utilitarianism is that it appears to fly in the face of our considered judgments about our obligations to other people. Suppose Ms. Z must decide between two actions: Action A will produce 1,001 units of happiness; Action B, 1,000 units. The only other significant difference between them is that Action A entails the breaking of a promise. By act-utilitarian lights, Ms. Z should choose Action A because it yields more happiness than Action B does. But we tend to think that keeping a promise is more important than a tiny gain in happiness. We often try to keep our promises even when we know that doing so will result in a decrease in utility. Some say that if our obligations to others sometimes outweigh considerations of overall happiness, then act-utilitarianism must be problematic.<sup>7</sup>

What can an act-utilitarian say to rebut these charges about justice, rights, and obligations? One frequent response goes like this: The scenarios put

<sup>7</sup>This case is based on one devised by W. D. Ross in *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 34–35.

forth by critics (such as the cases just cited) are misleading and implausible. They are always set up so that actions regarded as immoral produce the greatest happiness, leading to the conclusion that utilitarianism conflicts with commonsense morality and therefore cannot be an adequate moral theory. But in real life these kinds of actions almost never maximize happiness. In the case of Dr. X, her crime would almost certainly be discovered by physicians or other scientists, and she would be exposed as a murderer. This revelation would surely destroy her career, undermine patient-physician trust, tarnish the reputation of the scientific community, dry up funding for legitimate research, and prompt countless lawsuits. Scientists might even refuse to use the data from Dr. X's research because she obtained them through a heinous act. As one philosopher put it, "Given a clearheaded view of the world as it is and a realistic understanding of man's nature, it becomes more and more evident that injustice will never have, in the long run, greater utility than justice. . . . Thus injustice becomes, in actual practice, a source of great social disutility."<sup>8</sup>

The usual response to this defense is that the act-utilitarian is probably correct that most violations of commonsense morality do not maximize happiness—but at least some violations do. At least sometimes actions that have the best consequences do conflict with our credible moral principles or considered moral judgments. The charge is that the act-utilitarian cannot plausibly dismiss all counterexamples, and only one counterexample is required to show that maximizing utility is not a necessary and sufficient condition for right action.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Paul W. Taylor, *Principles of Ethics: An Introduction* (Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1975), 77–78.

<sup>9</sup>The points in this and the preceding paragraph were inspired by James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 111–12.

Unlike ethical egoism, act-utilitarianism (as well as rule-utilitarianism) does not fail Criterion 2 (consistency with our moral experiences), so we can move on to Criterion 3 (usefulness in moral problem solving). On this score, some scholars argue that act-utilitarianism deserves bad marks. Probably their most common complaint is what has been called the *no-rest problem*. Utilitarianism (in all its forms) requires that in our actions we *always* try to maximize utility, everyone considered. Say you are watching television. Utilitarianism would have you ask yourself, "Is this the best way to maximize happiness for everyone?" Probably not. You could be giving to charity or working as a volunteer for the local hospital or giving your coat to a homeless person or selling everything you own to buy food for hungry children. Whatever you are doing, there usually is something else you could do that would better maximize net happiness for everyone.

If act-utilitarianism does demand too much of us, then its usefulness as a guide to the moral life is suspect. One possible reply to this criticism is that the utilitarian burden can be lightened by devising rules that place limits on supererogatory actions. Another reply is that our moral common sense is simply wrong on this issue—we *should* be willing to perform, as our duty, many actions that are usually considered supererogatory. If necessary, we should be willing to give up our personal ambitions for the good of everyone. We should be willing, for example, to sacrifice a very large portion of our resources to help the poor.

To some, this reply seems questionable precisely because it challenges our commonsense moral intuitions—the very intuitions that we use to measure the plausibility of our moral judgments and principles. Moral common sense, they say, can be mistaken, and our intuitions can be tenuous or distorted—but we should cast them aside only for good reasons.

But a few utilitarians directly reject this appeal to common sense, declaring that relying so heavily on such intuitions is a mistake:

Admittedly utilitarianism does have consequences which are incompatible with the common moral consciousness, but I tended to take the view “so much the worse for the common moral consciousness.” That is, I was inclined to reject the common methodology of testing general ethical principles by seeing how they square with our feelings in particular instances.<sup>10</sup>

These utilitarians would ask, Isn’t it possible that in dire circumstances, saving a hundred innocent lives by allowing one to die would be the best thing to do even though allowing that one death would be a tragedy? Aren’t there times when the norms of justice and duty *should* be ignored for the greater good of society?

To avoid the problems that act-utilitarianism is alleged to have, some utilitarians have turned to rule-utilitarianism. By positing rules that should be consistently followed, rule-utilitarianism seems to align its moral judgments closer to those of common sense. And the theory itself is based on ideas about morality that seem perfectly sensible:

In general, rule utilitarianism seems to involve two rather plausible intuitions. In the first place, rule utilitarians want to emphasize that moral rules are important. Individual acts are justified by being shown to be in accordance with correct moral rules. In the second place, utility is important. Moral rules are shown to be correct by being shown to lead, somehow, to the maximization of utility. . . . Rule utilitarianism, in its various forms, tries to combine these intuitions into a single, coherent criterion of morality.<sup>11</sup>

But some philosophers have accused the theory of being internally inconsistent. They say, in other words, that it fails the minimum requirement of coherence. (If so, we can forgo discussion

of our three criteria of adequacy.) They argue as follows: Rule-utilitarianism says that actions are right if they conform to rules devised to maximize utility. Rules with exceptions or qualifications, however, maximize utility better than rules without them. For example, a rule like “Do not steal except in these circumstances” maximizes utility better than the rule “Do not steal.” It seems, then, that the best rules are those with amendments that make them as specific as possible to particular cases. But if the rules are changed in this way to maximize utility, they would end up mandating the same actions that act-utilitarianism does. They all would say, in effect, “do not do this except to maximize utility.” Rule-utilitarianism would lapse into act-utilitarianism.

Some rule-utilitarians respond to this criticism by denying that rules with a lot of exceptions would maximize utility. They say that people might fear that their own well-being would be threatened when others make multiple exceptions to rules. You might be reassured by a rule such as “Do not harm others” but feel uneasy about the rule “Do not harm others except in this situation.” What if you end up in that particular situation?

Those who criticize the theory admit that it is indeed possible for an exception-laden rule to produce more unhappiness than happiness because of the anxiety it causes. But, they say, it is also possible for such a rule to generate a very large measure of happiness—large enough to more than offset any ill effects spawned by rule exceptions. If so, then rule-utilitarianism could easily slip into act-utilitarianism, thus exhibiting all the conflicts with commonsense morality that act-utilitarianism is supposed to have.

## LEARNING FROM UTILITARIANISM

Regardless of how much credence we give to the arguments for and against utilitarianism, we must admit that the theory seems to embody a large part of the truth about morality. First, utilitarianism

<sup>10</sup>J. C. Smart, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 68.

<sup>11</sup>Fred Feldman, *Introductory Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 77–78.





### CRITICAL THOUGHT: Cross-Species Transplants: What Would a Utilitarian Do?

Like any adequate moral theory, utilitarianism should be able to help us resolve moral problems, including new moral issues arising from advances in science and medicine. A striking example of one such issue is cross-species transplantation, the transplanting of organs from one species to another, usually from nonhuman animals to humans. Scientists are already bioengineering pigs so their organs will not provoke tissue rejection in human recipients. Pigs are thought to be promising organ donors because of the similarities between pig and human organs. Many people are in favor of such research because it could open up new sources of transplantable organs, which are now in short supply and desperately needed by thousands of people whose organs are failing.

Would an act-utilitarian be likely to condone cross-species transplants of organs? If so, on what grounds? Would the unprecedented, “unnatural” character of these operations bother a utilitarian? Why or why not? Would you expect an act-utilitarian to approve of cross-species organ transplants if they involved the killing of one hundred pigs for every successful transplant? If only a very limited number of transplants could be done successfully each year, how do you think an act-utilitarian would decide who gets the operations? Would she choose randomly? Would she ever be justified (by utilitarian considerations) in, say, deciding to save a rich philanthropist while letting a poor person die for lack of a transplant?

begs us to consider that the consequences of our actions do indeed make a difference in our moral deliberations. Whatever factors work to make an action right (or wrong), surely the consequences of what we do must somehow be among them. Even if lying is morally wrong primarily because of the kind of act it is, we cannot plausibly think that a lie that saves a thousand lives is morally equivalent to one that changes nothing. Sometimes our considered moral judgments may tell us that an action is right regardless of the good (or evil) it does. And sometimes they may say that the good it does matters a great deal.

Second, utilitarianism—perhaps more than any other moral theory—incorporates the principle of impartiality, a fundamental pillar of morality itself. Everyone concerned counts equally in every moral decision. As Mill says, when we judge the rightness of our actions, utilitarianism requires us to be “as strictly impartial as a disinterested and

benevolent spectator.” Discrimination is forbidden, and equality reigns. We would expect no less from a plausible moral theory.

Third, utilitarianism is through and through a moral theory for promoting human welfare. At its core is the moral principle of beneficence—the obligation to act for the well-being of others. Beneficence is not the whole of morality, but to most people it is at least close to its heart.

### SUMMARY

Ethical egoism is the theory that the right action is the one that advances one’s own best interests. It promotes self-interested behavior but not necessarily selfish acts. The ethical egoist may define his self-interest in various ways—as pleasure, self-actualization, power, happiness, or other goods. The most important argument for ethical egoism relies on the theory known as psychological egoism, the view that the

motive for all our actions is self-interest. Psychological egoism, however, seems to ignore the fact that people sometimes do things that are not in their best interests. It also seems to misconstrue the relationship between our actions and the satisfaction that often follows from them. We seem to desire something other than satisfaction and then experience satisfaction as a result of getting what we desire.

Utilitarianism is the view that the morally right action is the one that produces the most favorable balance of good over evil, everyone considered. Act-utilitarianism says that right actions are those that directly produce the greatest overall happiness, everyone considered. Rule-utilitarianism says that the morally right action is the one covered by a rule that if generally followed would produce the most favorable balance of good over evil, everyone considered.

Critics argue that act-utilitarianism is not consistent with our considered judgments about justice. In many possible scenarios, the action that maximizes utility in a situation also seems blatantly unjust. Likewise, the theory seems to collide with our notions of rights and obligations. Again, it seems relatively easy to imagine scenarios in which utility is maximized while rights or obligations are shortchanged. An act-utilitarian might respond to these points by saying that such examples are unrealistic—that in real life, actions thought to be immoral almost never maximize happiness.

Rule-utilitarianism has been accused of being internally inconsistent—of easily collapsing into act-utilitarianism. The charge is that the rules that maximize happiness best are specific to particular cases, but such rules would sanction the same actions that act-utilitarianism does.

Regardless of criticisms lodged against it, utilitarianism offers important insights about the nature of morality: The consequences of our actions surely do matter in our moral deliberations and in our lives. The principle of impartiality is an essential part of moral decision making. And any plausible moral theory must somehow take into account the principle of beneficence.

## EXERCISES

### Review Questions

1. What is ethical egoism? What is the difference between act- and rule-egoism? (p. 78)
2. What is psychological egoism? (p. 80)
3. What is the psychological egoist argument for ethical egoism? (p. 81)
4. Is psychological egoism true? Why or why not? (pp. 81–82)
5. In what way is ethical egoism not consistent with our considered moral judgments? (p. 83)
6. What is the principle of utility? (p. 85)
7. What is the main difference between the ways that Mill and Bentham conceive of happiness? Which view seems more plausible? (pp. 86–87)
8. What is the difference between act- and rule-utilitarianism? (p. 87)
9. How do act- and rule-utilitarians differ in their views on rules? (p. 87)
10. Is act-utilitarianism consistent with our considered moral judgments regarding justice? Why or why not? (pp. 90–91)

### Discussion Questions

1. Is psychological egoism based on a conceptual confusion? Why or why not?
2. Why do critics regard ethical egoism as an inadequate moral theory? Are the critics right? Why or why not?
3. How would your life change if you became a consistent act-utilitarian?
4. How would your life change if you became a consistent rule-utilitarian?
5. To what was Mill referring when he said, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied”? Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
6. If you were on trial for your life (because of an alleged murder), would you want the judge to be an act-utilitarian, a rule-utilitarian, or neither? Why?

7. If you were the surgeon in the example about the five transplants, what would you do? Why?
8. Does act-utilitarianism conflict with commonsense judgments about rights? Why or why not?
9. Is there such a thing as a supererogatory act— or are all right actions simply our duty? What would an act-utilitarian say about supererogatory acts?
10. Suppose you had to decide which one of a dozen dying patients should receive a lifesaving drug, knowing that there was only enough of the medicine for one person. Would you feel comfortable making the decision as an act-utilitarian would? Why or why not?

## READING

### From *Utilitarianism*

JOHN STUART MILL

#### CHAPTER II. WHAT UTILITARIANISM IS

\* \* \*

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.

Now, such a theory of life excites in many minds, and among them in some of the most estimable in feeling and purpose, inveterate dislike. To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure—no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit—they designate as utterly mean and groveling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened; and modern holders of the doctrine are occasionally made the subject of equally polite comparisons by its German, French, and English assailants.

When thus attacked, the Epicureans have always answered, that it is not they, but their accusers, who represent human nature in a degrading light; since the accusation supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable. If this supposition were true, the charge could not be gainsaid, but would then be no longer an imputation; for if the sources of pleasure were precisely the same to human beings and to swine, the rule of life which is good enough for the one would be good enough for the other. The comparison of the Epicurean life to that of beasts is felt as degrading, precisely because a beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conceptions of happiness. Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal

appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification. I do not, indeed, consider the Epicureans to have been by any means faultless in drawing out their scheme of consequences from the utilitarian principle. To do this in any sufficient manner, many Stoic, as well as Christian elements require to be included. But there is no known Epicurean theory of life which does not assign to the pleasures of the intellect, of the feelings and imagination, and of the moral sentiments, a much higher value as pleasures than to those of mere sensation. It must be admitted, however, that utilitarian writers in general have placed the superiority of mental over bodily pleasures chiefly in the greater permanency, safety, uncostliness, &c., of the former—that is, in their circumstantial advantages rather than in their intrinsic nature. And on all these points utilitarians have fully proved their case; but they might have taken the other, and, as it may be called, higher ground, with entire consistency. It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognise the fact, that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone.

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.

Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties. Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he, for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him. If they ever fancy they would, it is only in cases of unhappiness so extreme, that to escape from it they would exchange their lot for almost any other, however, undesirable in their own eyes. A being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and is certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. We may give what explanation we please of this unwillingness; we may attribute it to pride, a name which is given indiscriminately to some of the most and to some of the least estimable feelings of which mankind are capable; we may refer it to the love of liberty and personal independence, an appeal to which was with the Stoics one of the most effective means for the inculcation of it; to the love of power, or the love of excitement, both of which do really enter into and contribute to it: but its most appropriate appellation is a sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or other, and in some, though by no means in exact, proportion to their higher faculties, and which is so essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong, that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them. Whoever supposes that this preference takes place at a sacrifice of happiness—that the superior being, in anything like equal circumstances, is not happier

than the inferior—confounds the two very different ideas, of happiness, and content. It is indisputable that the being whose capacities of enjoyment are low, has the greatest chance of having them fully satisfied; and a highly-endowed being will always feel that any happiness which he can look for, as the world is constituted, is imperfect. But he can learn to bear its imperfections, if they are at all bearable; and they will not make him envy the being who is indeed unconscious of the imperfections, but only because he feels not at all the good which those imperfections qualify. It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.

It may be objected, that many who are capable of the higher pleasures, occasionally, under the influence of temptation, postpone them to the lower. But this is quite compatible with a full appreciation of the intrinsic superiority of the higher. Men often, from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable; and this no less when the choice is between two bodily pleasures, than when it is between bodily and mental. They pursue sensual indulgences to the injury of health, though perfectly aware that health is the greater good. It may be further objected, that many who begin with youthful enthusiasm for everything noble, as they advance in years sink into indolence and selfishness. But I do not believe that those who undergo this very common change, voluntarily choose the lower description of pleasures in preference to the higher. I believe that before they devote themselves exclusively to the one, they have already become incapable of the other. Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them,

are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise. Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying. It may be questioned whether any one who has remained equally susceptible to both classes of pleasures, ever knowingly and calmly preferred the lower; though many, in all ages, have broken down in an ineffectual attempt to combine both.

From this verdict of the only competent judges, I apprehend there can be no appeal. On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, or which of two modes of existence is the most grateful to the feelings, apart from its moral attributes and from its consequences, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final. And there needs be the less hesitation to accept this judgment respecting the quality of pleasures, since there is no other tribunal to be referred to even on the question of quantity. What means are there of determining which is the acutest of two pains, or the intensest of two pleasurable sensations, except the general suffrage of those who are familiar with both? Neither pains nor pleasures are homogeneous, and pain is always heterogeneous with pleasure. What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular pain, except the feelings and judgment of the experienced? When, therefore, those feelings and judgment declare the pleasures derived from the higher faculties to be preferable *in kind*, apart from the question of intensity, to those of which the animal nature, disjoined from the higher faculties, is susceptible, they are entitled on this subject to the same regard.

I have dwelt on this point, as being a necessary part of a perfectly just conception of Utility or Happiness, considered as the directive rule of human con-

duct. But it is by no means an indispensable condition to the acceptance of the utilitarian standard; for that standard is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier, and that the world in general is immensely a gainer by it. Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit. But the bare enunciation of such an absurdity as this last, renders refutation superfluous.

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, as above explained, 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.

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I must again repeat, what the assailants of utilitarianism seldom have the justice to acknowledge, that the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism

requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as one would be done by, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. As the means of making the nearest approach to this ideal, utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness, or (as speaking practically it may be called) the interest, of every individual, as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and secondly, that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole; especially between his own happiness and the practice of such modes of conduct, negative and positive, as regard for the universal happiness prescribes: so that not only he may be unable to conceive the possibility of happiness to himself, consistently with conduct opposed to the general good, but also that a direct impulse to promote the general good may be in every individual one of the habitual motives of action, and the sentiments connected therewith may fill a large and prominent place in every human being's sentient existence. If the impugners of the utilitarian morality represented it to their own minds in this its true character, I know not what recommendation possessed by any other morality they could possibly affirm to be wanting to it: what more beautiful or more exalted developments of human nature any other ethical system can be supposed to foster, or what springs of action, not accessible to the utilitarian, such systems rely on for giving effect to their mandates.

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It may not be superfluous to notice a few more of the common misapprehensions of utilitarian ethics, even those which are so obvious and gross that it might appear impossible for any person of candour and intelligence to fall into them: since

persons, even of considerable mental endowments, often give themselves so little trouble to understand the bearings of any opinion against which they entertain a prejudice, and men are in general so little conscious of this voluntary ignorance as a defect, that the vulgarest misunderstandings of ethical doctrines are continually met with in the deliberate writings of persons of the greatest pretensions both to high principle and to philosophy. We not uncommonly hear the doctrine of utility inveighed against as a *godless* doctrine. If it be necessary to say anything at all against so mere an assumption, we may say that the question depends upon what idea we have formed of the moral character of the Deity. If it be a true belief that God desires, above all things, the happiness of his creatures, and that this was his purpose in their creation, utility is not only not a godless doctrine, but more profoundly religious than any other. If it be meant that utilitarianism does not recognise the revealed will of God as the supreme law of morals, I answer, that an utilitarian who believes in the perfect goodness and wisdom of God, necessarily believes that whatever God has thought fit to reveal on the subject of morals, must fulfil the requirements of utility in a supreme degree. But others besides utilitarians have been of opinion that the Christian revelation was intended, and is fitted, to inform the hearts and minds of mankind with a spirit which should enable them to find for themselves what is right, and incline them to do it when found, rather than to tell them, except in a very general way, what it is: and that we need a doctrine of ethics, carefully followed out, to *interpret* to us the will of God. Whether this opinion is correct or not, it is superfluous here to discuss; since whatever aid religion, either natural or revealed, can afford to ethical investigation, is as open to the utilitarian moralist as to any other. He can use it as the testimony of God to the usefulness or hurtfulness of any given course of action, by as good a right as others can use it for the indication of a transcendental law, having no connexion with usefulness or with happiness.

Again, Utility is often summarily stigmatized as an immoral doctrine by giving it the name of Expediency, and taking advantage of the popular use of that term to contrast it with Principle. But the Expedient, in the sense in which it is opposed to the Right, generally means that which is expedient for the particular interest of the agent himself: as when a minister sacrifices the interest of his country to keep himself in place. When it means anything better than this, it means that which is expedient for some immediate object, some temporary purpose, but which violates a rule whose observance is expedient in a much higher degree. The Expedient, in this sense, instead of being the same thing with the useful, is a branch of the hurtful. Thus, it would often be expedient, for the purpose of getting over some momentary embarrassment, or attaining some object immediately useful to ourselves or others, to tell a lie. But inasmuch as the cultivation in ourselves of a sensitive feeling on the subject of veracity, is one of the most useful, and the enfeeblement of that feeling one of the most hurtful, things to which our conduct can be instrumental; and inasmuch as any, even unintentional, deviation from truth, does that much towards weakening the trustworthiness of human assertion, which is not only the principal support of all present social well-being, but the insufficiency of which does more than any one thing that can be named to keep back civilisation, virtue, everything on which human happiness on the largest scale depends; we feel that the violation, for a present advantage, of a rule of such transcendent expediency, is not expedient, and that he who, for the sake of a convenience to himself or to some other individual, does what depends on him to deprive mankind of the good, and inflict upon them the evil, involved in the greater or less reliance which they can place in each other's word, acts the part of one of their worst enemies. Yet that even this rule, sacred as it is, admits of possible exceptions, is acknowledged by all moralists; the chief of which is when the withholding of some fact (as of information from a malefactor, or of bad news from a person dangerously ill) would preserve some one (especially

a person other than oneself) from great and unmerited evil, and when the withholding can only be effected by denial. But in order that the exception may not extend itself beyond the need, and may have the least possible effect in weakening reliance on veracity, it ought to be recognized, and, if possible, its

limits defined; and if the principle of utility is good for anything, it must be good for weighing these conflicting utilities against one another, and marking out the region within which one or the other preponderates.

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