



Utilitarianism

John Stuart Mill

What Utilitarianism Is

- Greatest Happiness Principle
 - Actions are morally right if they create happiness and wrong if they create the opposite of happiness (pain)
- Less constricting than other moral theories
 - Allows for exceptions, as there are no universal rules

Three Clauses of Utilitarianism

- U1: Consequentialism
- U2: Hedonism
- U3: Egalitarianism

U1: Consequentialism

- All acts are judged by the consequences that result
- No specific act is considered “good” or “bad” simply because of the act
- Murder can be morally right
 - If you kill a mass murderer in self-defense, murder was the moral act

U2: Hedonism

- Consequences are judged by the net happiness they create
- Anything we value, we value because it brings pleasure to us or others

U3: Egalitarianism

- Each person counts as one
- Even if one person seems more important, and his/her actions have more impact on the world, that person is not worth more

Utilitarian Actions

- There is a moral duty to sacrifice one's own happiness if it means an increase in the total happiness of the group
- But sacrifice has its limits
- Requires long-term thinking
- An act done as a duty is no more morally right than an act done out of desire

Worth

- Sometimes, certain pleasures may be worth more than others
 - quality vs. quantity
- “Of two pleasures, if there be one 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” (142a)

Judges

- It takes less for an inferior being to be content than it takes for a superior being
- Superior beings are not completely happy
- In order to judge happiness and pain, one must have the experience and knowledge
 - Therefore only superior beings can accurately judge

Why Utilitarianism is Morally Right

- “The theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded... [is] that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things...are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as a means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain” (141a)

Utilitarianism vs. Ethical Egoism and Psychological Egoism

- ◉ Ethical Egoism: the right act is the act that promotes the greatest happiness for *me*
- ◉ Psychological Egoism: no one does any act that he/she does not want to do
- ◉ Utilitarianism: the right act is that which benefits the most number of people

Increasing Happiness

- Total Utilitarianism: sum everyone's total level of pleasure
 - Increase this by increasing the population
- Average Utilitarianism: find the average level of happiness of the group
 - Increase this by getting rid of those who fall under the average

Discussion

- If some beings are considered inferior to others, does/should the egalitarian clause still apply?
- Which is better in practice to increase happiness, total utilitarianism or average utilitarianism?