

The Standard of Utility



What makes an action right?

The *Summum Bonum*

- ❖ There are few circumstances among those which make up the present condition of human knowledge, more unlike what might have been expected, or more significant of the backward state in which speculation on the most important subjects still lingers, than the little progress which has been made in the decision of the controversy respecting the criterion of right and wrong. From the dawn of philosophy, the question concerning the *summum bonum*, or, what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought, has occupied the most gifted intellects, and divided them into sects and schools, carrying on a vigorous warfare against one another. And after more than two thousand years the same discussions continue, philosophers are still ranged under the same contending banners, and neither thinkers nor mankind at large seem nearer to being unanimous on the subject, than when the youth Socrates listened to the old Protagoras, and asserted (if Plato's dialogue be grounded on a real conversation) the theory of utilitarianism against the popular morality of the so-called sophist. —Mill, *Utilitarianism* §1

The Highest Good

- ❖ An argument from the dawn of philosophy (Aristotle, *EN* 1094a17-21):
 1. If there is an end in the sphere of intentional action (a) desired for itself, and (b) such that other things are desired for it, then, unless (c) our actions are end-directed ad infinitum, this end will be the best good (τάγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον).
 2. There is some end in the sphere of intentional action which is (a) desired for itself, whilst (b) other things are desired for it.
 3. If our actions are end-directed ad infinitum, then all of our intentional actions will be empty and futile (*EN* 1094a20; κενὴν καὶ ματαίαν τὴν ὄρεξιν).
 4. It is not the case that all of our actions are empty and futile.
 5. So, some end is the best good (τάγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον).
 6. So, there is something which is the best good (τάγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον).

What Utilitarianism Is

- ❖ The Principle of Utility:
 - ❖ 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.—Mill,
Utilitarianism §2

The Principle of Utility

- ❖ An action *a* is right in proportion to the degree that *a* contributes to overall happiness, and wrong to the degree that it detracts from that happiness.
- ❖ Happiness is here understood as pleasure; hence, classical utilitarianism is hedonistic.
 - ❖ Substituting: An action *a* is right in proportion to the degree that *a* contributes to overall pleasure, and wrong to the degree that it detracts from that pleasure.

Some Observations

- ❖ CU is a form of *value monism*: there is exactly one highest good, and it is happiness (= pleasure).
- ❖ One could accept Utilitarianism in something very much like the form it takes in CU, but without being a hedonist. One can distinguish, that is, between:
 - ❖ Eudaimonistic Utilitarianism
 - ❖ Hedonistic Utilitarianism
 - ❖ We will proceed by focussing on CU, expressed as hedonistic utilitarianism.

Some Clarifications I

- ❖ CU is *not* a form of egoism: the principle does not say that an action a performed by S is right in so far as it tends to promote S 's happiness.
- ❖ CU *is* a form of consequentialism: it judges the rightness of an action exclusively by its consequences.
- ❖ So far, then, the notion of '*tends to promote*' is keyed to the actual outcomes of an action, not its intended or desired outcomes.
 - ❖ On this formulation, S 's intentions, hopes, desires, wishes, are not relevant to our appraisal to the rightness/wrongness of a .
 - ❖ N.b. that S 's breaking a promise might be a good thing to do, indeed, will be in fact the right thing to do, if it tends to augment overall happiness; by contrast, breaking a promise will be wrong if doing so tends to detract from the overall amount of happiness.

Some Clarifications II

- ❖ CU is agent-neutral: the goodness of a consequence is not made better or worse by being determined from some agent's point of view.
- ❖ CU requires some judgment of the *greatest amount* of happiness. Two approaches:
 - ❖ Goodness is aggregative (where one simply sums the goodness of the parts).
 - ❖ Goodness is organic (where the total amount of goodness may outstrip the sum of the parts).

Some Superficial Objections

- ❖ CU is crass and selfish.
 - ❖ Answer: no it's not. It is plainly not selfish, and is not crass in any obvious way.
- ❖ CU requires impossible quantification.
 - ❖ First answer: no it doesn't; it only requires comparability.
 - ❖ Second answer: why is quantification impossible?
- ❖ CU requires impossible calculation each time we act.
 - ❖ Answer: no it doesn't. CU is a standard of the goodness of actions, not a decision procedure.
 - ❖ Still, it may yet offer principles for developing a decision procedure.

Some Slightly Better Objections

- ❖ OK, it's not crass, but it devalues human life: pleasure is shared with the non-human beasts.
 - ❖ First response: push-pin is as good as poetry. (Or, rather: 'Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry.'—Bentham (1830, 206))
 - ❖ Cf. Singer: this is a welcome outcome, because it instructs us to value non-human animals appropriately.
 - ❖ Second response: Certain pleasures are qualitatively superior to others. (Or, rather: '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, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.' —Mill (*Utilitarianism*, §2))
 - ❖ Third response: Possibly the hedonism must go, but the consequentialism should remain.

CU as Hedonistic

- ❖ Hedonism, especially in so far as it is a form of value monism, looks problematic.
- ❖ Not every pleasure is valuable: the pleasure a sadist takes in a victim's suffering is not good; the pleasure of taken by a deranged murderer is not valuable. . .
- ❖ There seem to be stacks of pleasure-independent values: love, freedom, knowledge, authenticity.
 - ❖ Consider, on the last point: the experience machine.
 - ❖ Would you enter the machine if given the chance?

Two Directions

- ❖ These objections take an unduly narrow view of pleasure.
- ❖ CU can abandon hedonism in favour of value pluralism.
 - ❖ So, e.g., an action *a* is good in proportion to the degree that *a* contributes to overall value, and bad to the degree that it detracts from that overall value.
 - ❖ Two worries:
 - ❖ Perhaps untowards complexities in calculation result.
 - ❖ Disparate values may be incommensurable.

Epistemic Objections

- ❖ We cannot actually calculate the outcomes of our actions.
 - ❖ Answer: we don't have to calculate, any more than we have to calculate the trajectory of a turn in order to drive safely.
- ❖ Indeed, we cannot actually know the outcomes of our actions. So, we are forced into moral scepticism.
 - ❖ Answer: no we aren't. An action's rightness depends upon *foreseen* or *foreseeable* outcomes.

Deeper Objections

- ❖ Utilitarianism overlooks rights and the value of justice.
 - ❖ Consider the transplant case: a doctor working in a large urban hospital on any given day might well be able to save five dying patients by seizing one healthy patient and harvesting her organs. Since that is utility-maximizing, that is what she *should* do.
 - ❖ Here CU seems to entail that the wrong thing is the right thing.
- ❖ Some directions for responses:
 - ❖ It's not the wrong thing; it's the right thing.
 - ❖ The example wrongly assumes that killing an innocent person is on par with letting a sick person die.
 - ❖ Accommodating measures: indirect utilitarianism, e.g. rule utilitarianism.