

# *Utilitarianism*

- Utility = net pleasure or happiness
- Utilitarians generally use the terms happiness and utility interchangeably
- The right act is that which maximizes utility or happiness
- You can count yourself, but only as much as anyone else

# *Utilitarianism*



## Two parts to Utilitarianism

- Theory of Value = Hedonism
  - Only pleasure is intrinsically valuable
- Theory of Action = Consequentialism
  - Only the results of an act are relevant to its moral evaluation
  - The motive of the agent or any qualities of the act itself are irrelevant

# *Utilitarianism*



Nozick's Experience  
Machine

Is hedonism right?

Is pleasure really the  
only intrinsic  
value?

# *Utilitarianism*



- Jeremy Bentham  
(1748 - 1832)
- Founder of  
Utilitarianism
- Created the Hedonic  
Calculus

# *Utilitarianism*



- Jeremy Bentham presides over every meeting of the College of London.
- No college business can be conducted without his presence.

# *Utilitarianism*



A closeup of the wax head that sits atop Bentham's stuffed corpse.

The actual head resides in a bag underneath his chair.

*Auto icon of Jeremy Bentham*

# *Utilitarianism*



- Bentham: Founder of Utilitarianism
  - Social Reformer - reacting against stratification of society
  - Created the Hedonic Calculus: a practical way of maximizing utility or happiness

# *Utilitarianism*

- When calculating how much pleasure an action will produce, one should consider
  - Intensity
  - Duration
  - Fecundity (capacity for “growing” more pleasures)



# *Utilitarianism*



- John Stuart Mill
- Developed Utilitarianism into a popular system
- His name, not Bentham's is synonymous with Utilitarianism today

# *Utilitarianism*



- Objection: Utilitarianism is a crass, hedonistic philosophy
- Mill's reply: Some pleasures are qualitatively better than others (quality vs. quantity)
- Different than Bentham's calculus

# *Utilitarianism*



Some pleasures are **qualitatively** better than others.

Bentham's system treated all pleasures alike in kind, only differing in **quantity**.

# *Utilitarianism*

- Mill's defense: "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."
- Not all pleasures are created equally.
- We know some pleasure are better than others because people familiar with both prefer higher pleasures.

# *Utilitarianism*



## Higher pleasures

- Intellectual
- Cultural

## Lower pleasures

- Physical/bodily
- Common, “blue-collar” pleasures of the uneducated masses

# *Utilitarianism*



## Objections

- Mill is smuggling in other values under the guise of higher quality
  - pleasure + knowledge
  - aesthetic (artistic) value
- Mill is universalizing the values of the bourgeois elite (classist, ethnocentric)

# *Utilitarianism*

Objections to Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures

- Elitist, classist, ethnocentric (Mill: Educating the lower classes will allow them to enjoy higher pleasures also)
- What you enjoy depends purely on conditioning (Mill: higher pleasures are those preferred by those who have experienced a wide range of pleasures)

# *Utilitarianism*

Mill: Educating the masses will allow them to experience higher pleasures also.

Objection: What you find pleasurable is purely a matter of conditioning

Reply: Man's nature will gravitate towards learning, art and culture if afforded the opportunity



# *Utilitarianism: Objections*

Too permissive

- Utilitarian response: (1) bite the bullet (2) try to show negative side-effects, long-term consequences
- Rebuttal of the anti-utilitarian: The Publicity Requirement
- Rejoinder: Just don't get caught

Too demanding

# *Utilitarianism: Objections*

Impractical - calculating takes too long or is too complicated to be practical

Turns people into unfeeling calculating machines beholden to the results of hedonistic calculus

Godless doctrine

“Dirty Hands” objection: Requires one to compromise one’s principles and integrity for the greater good

# *Utilitarianism*

“Dirty Hands” objection: Requires one to compromise one’s principles and integrity for the greater good

Utilitarian response: This is either squeamishness (caused by moral conditioning) or selfishness. The higher principle is the greater good.

# *Utilitarianism*



## Thought experiments:

- The Fat Man
- The Drifter Hanged
- The Unwilling Organ Donor
- Torturing the Terrorist
- The Drowning Child
- The Bioweapons job
- The Corrupt General and the Coerced Executioner

# *Utilitarianism*

Act Utilitarianism: The right act is that which maximizes happiness (only version we've been discussing thus far)

Rule Utilitarianism: The right act is the act which is in accordance with the rule, which, if universally followed, would maximize happiness (response to the "too permissive" and "dirty hands" charges.)

# *Utilitarianism*



Objection: Rule utilitarianism “collapses” into act utilitarianism.

Don't kill.

Don't kill unless its in self-defense.

Or as a part of a war whose outcome brings a greater good.

Or if by so doing you an avert the deaths of one or more innocents...

OK, just don't kill unless it maximizes happiness.

# *Utilitarianism*

## Mill's proof for utilitarianism

- What's desirable is what's desired (intrinsically valuable)
- Everyone desires happiness
- Therefore happiness is desirable (intrinsically valuable)
- Criticism: Naturalistic fallacy - "desired" is a fact but "desirable" is a value

# *Utilitarianism*



Peter Singer

Does world poverty make Utilitarianism into a demanding philosophy after all?

It **is** demanding, but that's no objection, just shows we're selfish.

Examples

- Bob's Bugatti
- Dora's TV Set