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.
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
Objection: Utilitarianism is a crass, hedonistic philosophy

Mill’s reply: Some pleasure are qualitatively better than other (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 it’s in self-defense.
Or as a part of a war whose outcome brings a greater good.
Or if by so doing you can 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