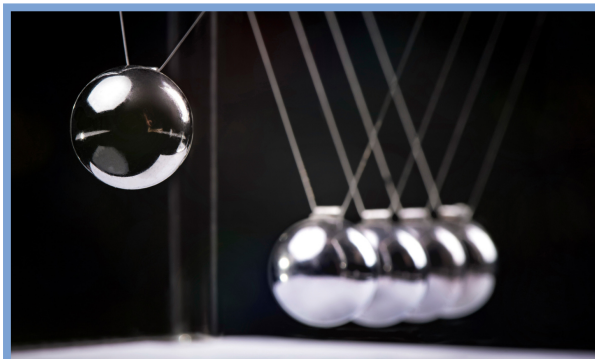# **Introduction** to **Utilitarianism**

1. **What** is utilitarianism?

The field of ethics has three branches: normative ethics, meta-ethics, and applied ethics; utilitarianism is located in the first of them, and is one of several different normative ethical theories (including divine command theory, Kantian ethics, and situation ethics). Meta-ethics is concerned with investigating whether or not morality exists (i.e. whether or not the words "right" and "wrong" describe objective reality); on the assumption that it does, normative ethics is concerned with how to make moral decisions (i.e. how to decide which actions are right and wrong) by establishing ethical principles. Applied ethics takes these ethical principles and puts them into practice in real-world situations.

Normative Ethics

A branch of ethics concerned with determining moral principles to guide the behaviour of human beings.

Utilitarianism

A teleological ethical theory, which promotes actions that produce the most good for those affected by them (e.g. human beings).

A Newton's cradle: the action of the first ball in the cradle has an effect on the last ball.

Utilitarianism is a teleological ethical theory, which means its adherents are concerned with the consequences of actions rather than the actions themselves. Some actions typically lead to evil consequences (e.g. killing), but not always. Utilitarians consider the likely outcome of any given action on a case-by-case basis, and use their best guess about its probable consequences to decide whether or not to take it. This contrasts sharply with the approaches of deontological theories, which are concerned with how closely actions follow prescribed sets of rules (often laws that adherents believe to be God-given, as in divine command theory). Teleological theories are also different from virtue theory, which is concerned with character development and built on the assumption that good people always make good decisions.

2. **How** does utilitarianism work?

Egoism

A teleological ethical theory, which promotes actions that produce the most good for the person who does them (i.e. the moral agent).

Utilitarianism works because of the existence of two different sensations: pain and pleasure; without them it could not operate as an ethical theory. Generally, utilitarians are not particular about how they define pain and pleasure, instead using them as catch-all terms that cover a whole range of sensations. In utilitarianism, the word "pain" denotes sensations that reasonable people try to avoid, from agony and suffering through to annoyance, boredom, and guilt. On the other hand, the word "pleasure" refers to sensations that reasonable people seek out and enjoy experiencing, like delight, elation, exhilaration, joy, love, serenity, and tranquillity.

Although there are different types of utilitarianism with subtle variations, all utilitarians argue that any action that either prevents, decreases or diminishes painful sensations is good, whilst any action that promotes, increases or intensifies them is evil. Conversely, any action that either prevents, decreases or diminishes pleasurable sensations is evil, whilst any action that promotes, increases or intensifies them is good. For utilitarians, happiness, pleasure and well-being are synonymous with good, whilst unhappiness, pain and depression are synonymous with pain. In this respect, utilitarianism is similar to another teleological ethical theory called egoism, which operates in a similar way; however, one significant difference between the two theories helps illuminate an important aspect of utilitarianism. Egoism asserts that an action is good if it produces pleasurable consequences for the moral agent (i.e. the person taking action) and evil if it produces painful consequences for him or her. Alternatively, utilitarianism asserts that whether an action is good or evil depends on the type of consequences it produces for all the people affected by it (or, according to Peter Singer, all the sentient beings). This distinction demonstrates that utilitarianism is altruistic, at least by the standard of egoism; however, because being a utilitarian involves considering the consequences of any action on potentially countless numbers of people, it is also considerably more complex.

3. **Why** is utilitarianism important?

Utilitarianism is an important normative ethical theory for various reasons. First, it is a secular theory: it does not rely on religion or belief in the existence of God to establish the difference between good and evil; however, it does not assert the non-existence of God either. This ambivalence about religion and God means utilitarianism has been widely adopted in many multicultural and more economically developed countries, because different religious and non-religious communities consider it an acceptable compromise (although there are some important caveats to this generalisation). Second, it is a significant and highly influential theory. In places like the United Kingdom and the United States,

The Palace of Westminster: British law making is heavily influenced by utilitarianism.

utilitarianism has exerted a tremendous effect over legal and social developments since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Increasingly, laws supported by Christian ethical principles have been amended or repealed by legislation inspired by the works of classical utilitarians, like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (e.g. the legalisation of abortion, and same-sex marriage). Finally, it is simple; unlike several other ethical theories, utilitarianism relies on a single principle. All utilitarians are required to do is create the most good for those affected by their actions; or, as Jeremy Bentham wrote in A Fragment on Government, "It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong."

George Thinks

Utilitarianism is an amazingly important ethical theory, and I think it's particularly groundbreaking for a couple of reasons. First, it's founded on an idea that most of us can agree with: generally, right thinking people try to avoid painful experiences and seek out pleasurable ones. Of course, this is a pretty obvious observation, but it took the particularly unique and pedantic mind of Jeremy Bentham to attach an ethical theory to it. Prior to him, the idea that pain and pleasure could reveal the difference between good and evil hadn't been thought of. Needless, to say, it's changed the way we think about ethics ever since, and looks likely to continue to do so well into the future (as we increasingly acknowledge the pain and suffering we inflict on animals). Second, utilitarianism rests on a single principle, which Jeremy Bentham called "the principle of utility". Although this principle doesn't always make deciding how to act particularly simple, the idea that ethics can be reduced to such a short mathematical maxim revolutionised how people think about morality.