

# Louis Pojman on Utilitarianism

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Imagine promising to transport \$5 million in cash from the home of a dying man to his favourite baseball team, the New York Yankees, shortly before his death. Now imagine seeing a newspaper advert for the World Hunger Relief Organisation before completing the transfer. Should the money still be given to the New York Yankees or gifted to the World Hunger Relief Organisation, which promises to save 100,000 lives? A utilitarian would argue that the dead man's money should be gifted to the World Hunger Relief Organisation despite breaking a promise.

## Classic Utilitarianism

**Jeremy Bentham:** Jeremy Bentham articulated the two main features of utilitarianism: the consequentialist principle (i.e. whether or not an act is right is determined by its consequences) and the utility principle (i.e. whether or not a consequence is good is determined by how much pleasure it creates for all affected by it). He devised the hedonic calculus for calculating pleasure. His formulation is sometimes criticised for being too simplistic.

**John Stuart Mill:** John Stuart Mill developed and extended Jeremy Bentham's formulation of utilitarianism into a type sometimes referred to as "eudaimonistic utilitarianism". He distinguished between higher and lower pleasures and argued that higher pleasures (e.g. reading literature) are of greater value than lower pleasures (e.g. eating). His formulation is sometimes criticised for being elitist and expanding the idea of pleasure too wide.

## Act- and Rule-Utilitarianism

When confronted by a moral dilemma, act utilitarianism requires a moral agent to apply the principle of utility on a case-by-case basis. Alternatively, rule utilitarianism requires a moral agent to follow a set of pre-calculated rules that has been devised using the principle of utility. Rule utilitarians should only apply the principle of utility on a case-by-case basis if the dilemma cannot be resolved by recourse to a pre-calculated rule.

**The strengths of utilitarianism:** first, utilitarianism is relatively simple to apply because it relies on a single principle, the principle of utility. Second, it is commonsensical and tangible because it aims to promote pleasure and prevent pain. Third, it is teleological, so it helps solve the problem of posterity; when apparently innocuous actions cause consequences for future generations (e.g. pollution), they can be accounted for and prohibited.

## Criticism of Utilitarianism

There are several criticisms of utilitarianism. First, there are problems with formulating utilitarianism: should people aim to promote the highest average or highest sum of happiness, and should people consider animals? Second, the comparative consequences objection: it is impossible to predict the future accurately, so comparing consequences is challenging. Third, the consistency objection to rule utilitarianism: rule utilitarianism appears to collapse into act utilitarianism or become a deontological (i.e. duty-based) theory. Fourth, the no-rest objection: utilitarianism demands too much; people should not enjoy leisure time if they can use it to help those less fortunate. Peter Singer argues that people should donate every cent they earn over \$30,000 to the poor. Fifth, the publicity objection: act utilitarianism does not provide rule and society cannot function without publicising laws. Sixth, the relativism objection: utilitarianism sometimes allows apparently morally indefensible actions (e.g. torture).

## Criticism of the Ends Justifying Immoral Means

The most significant criticism of utilitarianism is that it appears to justify the use of immoral means to achieve moral ends. First, the lying objection: utilitarianism appears to permit lying in counterintuitive situations. For example, if two actions produce the same amount of pleasure, but one involves lying and the other does not, utilitarianism does not provide any reason to prefer the option that does not involve lying. Second, the integrity objection: utilitarianism

requires people to respond to chance situations in ways that may compromise their sense of morality. For example, an arbitrary set of circumstances could require someone to murder one innocent to save the lives of many (e.g. the Holocaust); people with integrity should not submit to this. Third, the justice objection: utilitarianism appears to allow unjust actions for the greater good. For example, the framing of an innocent man if the arrest of the actual perpetrator would provoke a riot or the torture of a maniac's innocent daughter if it would prevent him from murder.

## Conclusion

Multilevel rule utilitarianism is a meaningful normative ethical theory because it satisfies the purpose of ethics, provides a clear decision-making procedure for moral behaviour, and focuses on helping others. Multilevel rule utilitarianism requires moral agents to follow the first tier of utility maximising rules, revert to the second tier of conflict resolving rules if there is a conflict between rules in the first tier, and only apply the principle of utility directly (i.e. proceed to the third tier) if the first tier rules are silent or the second tier rules cannot resolve a conflict.

### George Thinks

This chapter of *Discovering Right and Wrong* provides a great summary of utilitarianism and is well worth reading. It's only 20 pages long but surveys the theory's most famous formulations and evaluates their strengths and weaknesses with surprising balance. Although Louis Pojman had his own particular ethical prejudices, *Discovering Right and Wrong* is non-proselytising, at least by the standard of most books on ethics. In other words, he aimed to present various normative ethical theories fairly and impartially. The first half of this chapter is beneficial because it accurately summarises Jeremy Bentham's formulation of utilitarianism and its development by John Stuart Mill. Additionally, it explains the hierarchy of pleasures (i.e. the difference between higher pleasures and lower pleasures) and the distinguishing features of act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. The latter of which Louis Pojman contended is the stronger of the two.

The second half of this chapter turns to an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism and an overall evaluation of the theory. Initially, Louis Pojman presents six significant criticisms. Although a close reading of either Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* or John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* provides obvious responses to some of these criticisms, Louis Pojman's objective was not to present only the strongest objections but a variety of the criticisms that have been ranged against the theory. Towards the end of the chapter, he dealt with the most significant criticism separately: the charge that utilitarianism permits the use of immoral means to achieve moral ends. Although there are some major problems with rule utilitarianism (including that it appears to either collapse into act utilitarianism or become a deontological theory), Louis Pojman concluded, somewhat plausibly, that it provides the most workable version of utilitarianism.

