

Louis Pojman on Utilitarianism

1. **Who** was Louis Pojman, and what are his key ideas on utilitarianism?

Louis Pojman (1935-2005) was an American philosopher known for authoring several popular textbooks and supporting moral objectivism. He grew up in Cicero, Illinois, before training to become a priest in the Reformed Church of America. He began his academic career relatively late in life, earning a MA in 1967 and a PhD in 1972, both from Union Theological Seminary, before completing a DPhil at the University of Oxford in 1977. Towards the end of his career, he held full professorships at the University of Mississippi and the United States Military Academy. His research interests included classic problems in the philosophy of religion and ethics, both of which he wrote about extensively in approximately 60 books and 80 articles published during his life. In 1989, Louis Pojman completed one of his most famous textbooks, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, which was republished in four further editions during his lifetime and has since run to its eighth edition in the years since his death. In the chapter on utilitarianism in this textbook, Louis Pojman outlined his key ideas on the theory (including the ones listed below).

Utilitarianism is distillable:

utilitarianism can be reduced to two types: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. These two types are based on two key principles: the consequentialist principle (i.e. the teleological focus on ends rather than means) and the utility principle (i.e. the principle of utility).

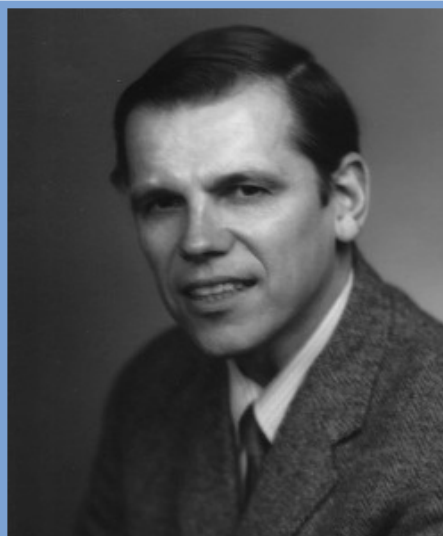
Utilitarianism is flawed:

act utilitarianism has several significant weaknesses that prevent it from being implemented as a workable normative ethical theory. Rule utilitarianism has weaknesses as well; however, they are less problematic because it is possible to mitigate against and overcome them.

Utilitarianism is promising:

although act utilitarianism is fundamentally flawed and impossible to implement, rule utilitarianism, in its multilevel formulation, provides a workable normative ethical theory that could be enacted in many modern societies. Rule utilitarianism is not perfect but has potential.

2. **How** do Louis Pojman's key ideas on utilitarianism work?



Louis Pojman

Louis' Pojman's key ideas on utilitarianism reduce the theory to its classical varieties and analyse them closely. He evaluated whether or not modern societies could successfully implement act or rule utilitarianism. Louis Pojman concluded that act utilitarianism is too problematic, but a version of rule utilitarianism (i.e. multilevel rule utilitarianism) showed promise. His analysis of the theory largely ignored developments during his lifetime under scholars like Karl Popper (1902-1994) and Peter Singer (b. 1946).

Utilitarianism is distillable: Louis Pojman's first key idea is that utilitarianism can be distilled into two varieties: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. Whilst there is debate about whether or not rule utilitarianism is a legitimate formulation (because it appears to either collapse into act utilitarianism or become a deontological theory), Louis Pojman claimed it is. He argued that both varieties are fundamentally founded on two key principles: the consequentialist principle, which directs moral agents to consider only the outcomes of their actions, and the utility principle, which requires moral agents to calculate the impact of their actions on all those affected by them.

Utilitarianism is flawed: in *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, Louis Pojman presented some strengths of utilitarianism, including that it is relatively simple to understand, commonsensical, being concerned with the apparently universal urge to promote pleasure and prevent pain, and forward-thinking, thereby helping with issues in environmental ethics that require action now to avoid catastrophic consequences in the future. However, he also identified several serious flaws. Utilitarianism can be hard to formulate because it is not clear whether utilitarians should seek the greatest total happiness or the greatest average happiness. Additionally, it can be difficult to apply because it depends on considering the unpredictable consequences of actions; also, it prohibits any leisure time because this is rarely the best way to increase total happiness. Perhaps most problematically of all, utilitarianism appears to permit immoral means (e.g. lying, corruption, and the torture of innocents) for achieving moral ends.

Utilitarianism is promising: Louis Pojman's third key idea is that multilevel rule utilitarianism is a promising formulation of the theory that modern societies could implement. In this variety, society develops a group of utility maximising rules (e.g. "keep your word" and "help the needy") that people are obliged to abide by unless they come into conflict with one another. Under such circumstances, people are required to revert to the second level of pre-calculated conflict resolving rules (e.g. "helping the needy is more important than keeping your word"). Only in cases where there are neither appropriate utility maximising rules nor relevant conflict resolving rules to appeal to may people revert to the third and final level: the remainder rule (i.e. the principle of utility). In such circumstances, moral agents are free to act as they wish, as long as their actions are intended to produce the greatest amount of pleasure and the least amount of pain for those affected by them.

3. **Why** are Louis Pojman's key ideas on utilitarianism important?

They concisely outline key elements of utilitarianism: Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong is not all about utilitarianism. Only one chapter is dedicated to the theory, so Louis Pojman took great care to concisely clarify his key ideas. Consequently, they are clear and easy to understand.

They propose rule utilitarianism as a workable theory: despite engaging critically with utilitarianism, especially act utilitarianism, Louis Pojman presented it as a potentially workable normative ethical theory in its multilevel rule formulation. His key ideas suggest that societies could successfully implement utilitarianism.

They impartially analyse the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism: Louis Pojman's key ideas are relatively fair and even-handed. Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong is a textbook, and although some ethical theories receive very robust criticism (e.g. moral relativism), most are treated with considerable balance. This is true of utilitarianism, which is analysed and evaluated with one of the more impartial-appearing approaches that any reader is likely to encounter in the field of ethics.



The United States Military Academy: Louis Pojman was a professor at West Point.

George Thinks

Louis Pojman wasn't a proponent of utilitarianism; instead, he most famously argued for a position known as moral objectivism. The approximate analogue of moral objectivism is moral relativism, a position for which he reserved a considerable amount of scorn. Nevertheless, moral relativism aside, Louis Pojman appeared interested in giving most normative ethical theories a fair hearing. In Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong, this means that utilitarianism was analysed and evaluated in a pretty balanced way. Of course, not everyone would agree, and the fact he listed more weaknesses than strengths would seem to counter this claim; however, in the final accounting, Louis Pojman did admit that multilevel rule utilitarianism is the kind of theory that most societies could work with (even if it's not necessarily the best). As far as short and informative summaries of utilitarianism go then, Louis Pojman's is well worth getting to grips with because it accurately summarises the most important aspects and gives the theory a fair trial in the court of ethical opinion.

