

UTILITARIANISM

A. Overview

1. Associated with the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill



Jeremy Bentham
(1748-1832)



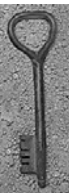
John Stuart Mill
(1806-1873)

A. Overview

2. The ethical theory most discussed by philosophers; still very popular.
3. Really a whole family of related theories.
4. Common slogan: morality involves creating “the greatest good for the greatest number”.
5. We’re going to start with the simplest version, hedonic act utilitarianism (HAU), which is roughly the version first outlined by Bentham.
6. HAU is a combination of two views: *hedonism* and *act consequentialism*


B. Hedonism

1. A view about *value*, or goodness and badness.
2. Core of hedonism:
 - the only thing that is intrinsically good is **pleasure**
 - the only thing that is intrinsically bad is **pain**.
3. Other things can be extrinsically good if they lead to pleasure or help avoid pain. (money, exercise)
4. Other things can be extrinsically bad if they lead to pain or prevent pleasure. (malnutrition, a tax audit)
5. Pleasure and pains come in *episodes*:
 - particular experiences had by a particular person for a particular length of time.
6. Each episode has a determinate amount of intrinsic goodness or badness: can be quantified and measured




B. Hedonism

7. A **hedon** = a standard unit of pleasure
A **dolor** = a standard unit of pain
8. According to hedonism, the goodness and badness of an event or state of affairs can be measured in hedons and dolors.
9. For a given episode, we have this formula:
intensity of pleasure x duration of pleasure = # of hedons
10. The number of dolors produced by a given episode of pain can be determined roughly as follows:
intensity of pain x duration of pain = # of dolors
11. If a 1-minute massage creates 1 hedon, then a 5-minute massage creates 5 hedons




C. Consequentialism

1. Speaking generally, consequentialism is the view that the rightness or wrongness of an act are determined by its consequences
2. *Act consequentialism* is the view that an act is right if and only if there is no act that the person could perform that would bring about *better* consequences.
3. Bentham's version involves summing the total number of hedons and dolors created.
4. By definition, the **total hedonic value** of an act is the total gotten by adding up all the hedons produced, and subtracting the number of dolors produced, for *every person* affected.



C. Consequentialism


5. A formulation of Hedonic Act Utilitarianism.
(HAU) An act token X performed by person P at time T is morally right if and only if there is no act that P could perform at time T that would have a greater total hedonic value than act X.
6. Generally this means that an act is right if and only if no alternative act would bring about a greater sum total of pleasure minus pain for everyone involved.
7. An example: Joe Senior is deciding whether to go to class to take his ethics exam, or blow it off to go drinking with his buddies.



C. Consequentialism

	Go Party	Take Exam
HEDONS	Partying with Buddies (100 hedons) Buddies glad to have him there (500 hedons)	Gets college degree (5000 hedons) Gets good job, beautiful spouse, happy life (100,000 hedons)
DOLORS	Flunks exam (500 dolors) Cannot get college degree (10,000 dolors) Parents disappointed (1000 dolors)	Has to take exam (100 dolors) Buddies disappointed (500 dolors) Blister on pen finger (50 dolors)
TOTAL HEDONIC VALUE	Sum = -10,900	Sum = 104,350

On HAU, the morally right thing to do is obvious.



C. Consequentialism


8. However, consider a more difficult case.

Ruth is 94 years old and is suffering from a deadly form of cancer.

She has at most a year to live, and if she does live she will need to live constantly attached to machines and in a state of great pain.

However, she is very beloved by her family, and will be greatly missed when she dies.

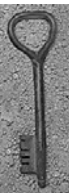
Her decision is the difficult one as to whether or not to pull the plug.



C. Consequentialism

	Pull Plug	Stay Attached
HEDONS	None	Gets to see her family for another year (5000 hedons) Family gets to see her (10,000 hedons)
DOLORS	Family grieves (for an additional year) (60,000 dolors)	Has to suffer a year's worth of intense pain (30,000 dolors) Family grieves a year later (50,000 dolors)
TOTAL HEDONIC VALUE	Sum = -60,000	Sum = -65,000

HAU says the right thing is to pull the plug.



D. Intentions and Expected Consequences


1. We've stated HAU as follows:

(HAU) An act token X performed by person P at time T is morally right if and only if there is no act that P could perform at time T that would have a greater total hedonic value than act X.

2. Does not require P to *believe* that X produces the best consequences.
- Does not require P to perform X *for that reason*.

3. Thief pulling plug on Ruth while trying to steal the TV may still be *doing the right thing*.

4. Doesn't require anyone to *think about* what will produce the highest total hedonic value.
- May even require that someone *not* think about it.



D. Intentions and Expected Consequences


5. Suppose I drown a child I see on a whim, and it turns out (unbeknownst to me) the child would have grown up to be the next Hitler or Stalin.

6. According to HAU, my act of was morally right, even though I did not know it was the best thing to do.

7. Leads some to give different versions of utilitarianism:

a) Might say an act is right when there is no alternative it would be *rational to believe* would have a greater total hedonic value.

b) Might say an act is right when knowing or believing that no alternative would have a greater total hedonic value is *the reason or motive* for the action.



D. Intentions and Expected Consequences

8. A response: distinguish an act's being *right* or *wrong* from its being praiseworthy and blameworthy

a) Baby Hitler killer did right thing, but is worthy of blame or punishment.


b) Baby Hitler rescuer did wrong thing, but is worthy of praise or reward for trying to do right thing.

9. Do intentions/motivations really matter?

- Consider a volunteer who reads to kids at a library.


- She does it because she enjoys it, not maximize total amount of hedonic value.

- Isn't the *action* still morally right?




E. Mill's Version of Utilitarianism

- One important difference from Bentham's.
- Mill thinks that some *kinds* of happiness or pleasures are better than others.
- Intellectual pleasure, the satisfactions of finishing a project, or a long-term friendship ... are better than...
"base"/"animal" pleasures taken in eating, or sex.
- Mill's formula would be instead:
Intensity of pleasure x duration of pleasure x **quality** of pleasure = # of hedons produced




E. Mill's Version of Utilitarianism

- For Mill, five minutes of intellectual pleasure produces more good than five minutes of sexual pleasure (of the same intensity)
- He writes:
It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a fool satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side. (p. 143 of your book)



E. Mill's Version of Utilitarianism

- His argument:
(P1) There are people (called "competent judges") who have experienced different kinds of pleasure, and those people routinely prefer certain kinds of pleasure over others.
(P2) If (P1) then some kinds of pleasure are better than others.
(C) Therefore, certain kinds of pleasure are better than others.
- What do you think?
- Sometimes Mill's version of utilitarianism is called **eudaimonistic utilitarianism** (from the Greek word *eudaimonia*, meaning something in between "happiness" and "thriving")




F. Arguments for Utilitarianism

- One attraction is its simplicity and intuitive appeal.
- Here's a relatively natural argument for the consequentialism part of utilitarianism:

(P1) Doing the right thing can never make the world a worse place than doing the wrong thing.

(P2) If doing the right thing can never make the world a worse place than doing the wrong thing, then consequentialism is true.

(C) Therefore, consequentialism is true.
- As usual, the argument is valid. Is it sound?
- Is it question-begging?




F. Arguments for Utilitarianism

- What about the hedonism/eudaimonism part of consequentialism? Here's a passage from Mill:

The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it; and so of the other sources of experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it. ... No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. This, however, being a fact, we have not only all the proof which the case admits of, but all which it possible to require, that happiness is a good: that each person's happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons.

(p. 145 of your textbook)



F. Arguments for Utilitarianism

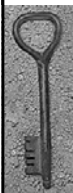
- Here's how his argument might be reconstructed:

(P1) The only things that anyone actually desires for their own sake are happiness and the avoidance of unhappiness.

(P2) If the only things that anyone desires for their own sake are happiness and the avoidance of unhappiness, then happiness and the avoidance of unhappiness are the only things that are desirable for their own sake.

(P3) If happiness and the avoidance of unhappiness are the only things that are desirable for their own sake, then happiness and the avoidance of unhappiness are the only things that are intrinsically good.

(C) Therefore, happiness and the avoidance of unhappiness are the only things that are intrinsically good.



F. Arguments in Favor of Utilitarianism

7. The argument is valid. Is it sound?

8. Are happiness and unhappiness the only things that people desire *for their own sakes*?

(Mill does not mean that these are the only things that people desire; only that everything else is desired as a means towards these ends.)

9. Can there be things that are desirable for their own sakes but which no one actually desires?

10. Can there be things that are good but not desirable?

11. We shall return to many of these questions when we speak about **axiology** later in the semester.
