



## 2.1 UTILITARIANISM



### Introduction

#### The Trolley Problem

*My house is quite close to the train station, so I usually follow the track when I walk home from college. One day as I was passing I heard a lot of screaming off in the distance. As I drew closer, I could see there were five people lined up like sardines on the rails. Just as in an old western, it looked as though some villain had tied them to the track! As soon as they spotted me they began desperately calling for help. 'How? How?!' I asked, gazing up at the twenty-foot barbed wire fence that stood between us. 'Look!' they said in unison, jerking their heads in the direction of a peculiar-looking pedestal a few paces to my left, 'There's a button on there! Press that button, it will switch the tracks and then we'll all be saved!' I rushed over immediately, but just as I was about to push the button I saw, over in the far distance, on the other track, a small figure wrestling with his own bonds. 'Hey!' I shouted to the five of them at the top of my voice, 'Don't you know there's somebody else tied up on the other side of the tracks?'*



*'Yes,' one of them said, 'but please, there are five of us and only one of him!'*

*My finger hovered over the button in indecision.*

*'Quick!' they yelled, this time truly panicked, 'The train, oh God, the train, it's coming!'*

#### What would you do?

This thought experiment, known as *The Trolley Problem*, was devised by the moral philosopher Philippa Foot in the late 1960s (the trolley referred to in the title is not the kind found outside Tesco but, as in the story, a variety of train). It has been widely used by both philosophers and psychologists as a litmus test of an individual's ethical instincts. The dilemma it poses gets right to the heart of what ethics is about: when faced with a situation where there is no easy option, what exactly should we do?

If you read *The Trolley Problem* and intuitively felt that you should switch the tracks in order to save five people at the expense of one, then chances are that you have utilitarian leanings. In fact, the majority of people do, but the theory itself found its most sustained treatment in the works of the nineteenth-century English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. This has come to be known as Classical Utilitarianism.

#### Social, Political and Cultural Influences

The **Enlightenment** was a cultural and intellectual movement in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some of its key thinkers, **John Locke** and **David Hume**, influenced Bentham. Both were **empiricists** which meant they focused on information that was available from the world, rather than what we can know through logic alone or divine revelation. This is reflected in Bentham's focus on empirical human experience and deducing from human behaviour that humans work to achieve happiness. Locke also influenced Bentham on his view that reason was more important than custom and tradition. This can be seen in Bentham's rejection of Christian ethics and traditions.

The **Industrial Revolution** took place in England between 1760 and 1840, which is almost exactly the time Bentham was alive. It was a time of great change in England, when many people moved from the countryside to cities and many jobs in factories and industries were created. Although it created great economic development, it caused many social problems. People lived in cramped, dirty conditions and worked long hours in dangerous factories. Prisoners were treated very badly and lived in terrible conditions. There were also problems with alcoholism and prostitution.

### Taking it further

Here is an extract from a parliamentary paper in 1842 which formed part of three reports into the working conditions of labour in the mines in Britain. These reports led to the Mines Act of 1842 that prohibited the employment in the mines of all women and of boys less than 13 years of age.

This is an account about a girl called Isabella Read who worked as a coal bearer, aged 12.

*I works on mother's account, as father has been dead two years. Mother bides at home, she is troubled with bad breath, and is weak in her body from early labour. I am wrought with sister and brother, it is very sore work; cannot say how many rakes or journeys I make from pit's bottom to wall face and back, thinks about 30 or 25 on the average; the distance varies from 100 to 250 fathom.*

*I carry about 1 cwt. and a quarter on my back; have to stoop much and creep through water, which is frequently up to the calves of my legs. When first down fell frequently asleep while waiting for coal from heat and fatigue.*

*I do not like the work, nor do the lassies, but they are made to like it. When the weather is warm there is difficulty in breathing, and frequently the lights go out.*

([zzed.uk/6671-Ashley-Mines](http://zzed.uk/6671-Ashley-Mines))

- ◆ How do you respond to the working conditions Isabella Read describes and the fact she had to work at age 12? Consider how legal changes would have improved Isabella Read's life.
- ◆ How do you think legal changes, and the effect they had on everyday people, could reflect on the benefits of utilitarianism?

## Impact of Utilitarianism on Political and Social Reform

Utilitarianism provided an important philosophy behind many changes in society that helped address the pain and suffering that was brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Bentham wanted to change society and the impact of utilitarianism is testament to the strength, relevance and popularity of the ideas.

Utilitarianism brought about social change through its emphasis on the importance of the majority of the people – the people living in urban slums and working in factories – rather than the minority who were landowners and factory owners and had immense wealth and power at that time.

Change also came about through utilitarianism's focus on making life more pleasurable and enjoyable. Thus slaves, prisoners and the poorest members of society were recognised as needing to be happy, if society were to be moral.

This went against the dominant Christian view at the time that poverty was the will of God and therefore should not be reformed or changed. It also denied that suffering could serve a greater, religious purpose. It provided a flexible ethic that sought beneficial outcomes, rather than following strict, moral absolutes taught by the Church, such as divine command ethics.

### Discussion:

1. What do you think the impact of utilitarianism says about the overall strengths and weaknesses of the theory? In what ways might it make the theory seem more relevant and practical?

## Legal changes

- ◆ Development of the postal system that allowed anyone to send a letter
- ◆ Prison reform – in the later 1700s, attitudes to prisons began to change through the work of activists such as Elizabeth Fry and John Howard who promoted better conditions in prisons and a focus on rehabilitation, rather than punishment
- ◆ The abolition of slavery in 1833 – made slavery illegal in Britain
- ◆ Reform Bill of 1832 – reformed Parliament and meant more men could vote
- ◆ Factory Act of 1833 – banned children under the age of nine from working in factories and limited the number of hours all children could work
- ◆ Factory Act of 1847 – banned all children and women from working for more than 10 hours a day

## Key Concepts

All utilitarianism theories rely on three key ethical concepts. Before we look at the theory in detail, it is advisable to become acquainted with the following:

1. **Consequentialist** – Utilitarianism places ethical judgement on whether an action leads to the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. It is concerned with the outcome, not the will or intention of the moral agent.
2. **Relativist** – Utilitarianism believes what is right will depend on the situation. Sometimes an action will be right but at other times it will not be – it all depends on whether the action will produce the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people.
3. **Instrumental** – Utilitarianism believes that no moral actions have **intrinsic** value, only instrumental value if they produce the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest amount of people. Another way of putting this is that Utilitarians think the *ends always justify the means*.

### Activity:

2. Apply the principle of utility to another ethical problem. Describe the ethical situation and what actions should be taken to achieve a greater balance of happiness over pain.



There are also four other terms which will crop up a lot in this section: **utility, pleasure, hedonism** and **happiness**. These will be discussed in detail below, for now however, it is worth considering some of the broad **implications of consequentialist ethical theories**:

- ✗ There is no consideration of the attitude or intention of the moral agent. This causes a problem, for example, if someone intentionally commits an evil act but it accidentally produces a morally good outcome; then it seems wrong to call that person a good person.
- ✗ It is very hard to predict the outcome of actions, especially secondary or indirect consequences, because it is based on unknown future events. Therefore, a focus on intentions or adherence to moral laws might be considered more practical and reliable.
- ✓ It is right to focus on outcomes and consequences as only they have an effect on the lives of others. We are naturally concerned with the effect our actions will have on others and are generally forward-looking.

## Bentham's Utilitarianism

### 1. What is Utility?

Jeremy Bentham is often considered the founder of the utilitarian philosophy. His ground-breaking *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* opens with these famous words:

*Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.*

Crucially, Bentham is arguing that being ruled by **pain** and **pleasure** is just the way humans are. We have no choice in the matter; we must seek pleasure, and we must avoid pain. He goes on to argue that basing our ethical decision-making (that is, how we decide what to do) on anything else would simply be foolish.



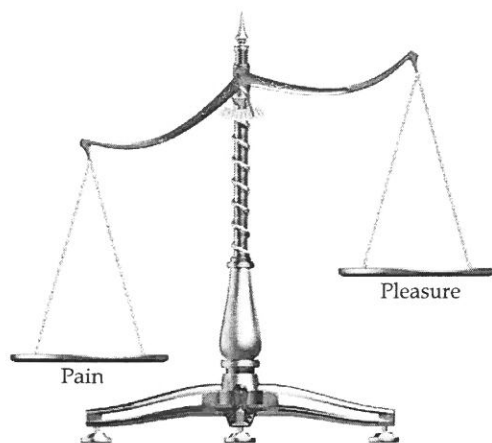
Jeremy Bentham

### 2. The Principle of Utility

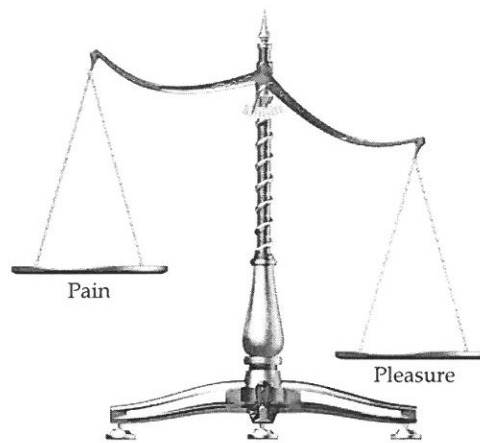
Having made this claim about human nature (these are sometimes called *descriptive claims* – they describe how things are), Bentham goes on to make his *normative claim* (he wants to tell us how things ought to be). This is the *principle of utility* which states:

When faced with an ethical decision, we should choose the course of action which *maximises* pleasure and *minimises* pain for the *greatest number of people*.

Go back to the story. Can you see how choosing to save lots of people maximises more pleasure and minimises more pain than the alternative?



A morally good action



A morally bad action

### 3. How is Utility Calculated? Bentham's Hedonic Calculus

Bentham was trained as a lawyer and had a keen interest in social and legal reform, so it is no surprise that he intended his system to have practical uses. To that end he devised what has come to be known as the *hedonic calculus*, a method for determining *quantitatively* (in terms of quantities, i.e. numbers) the right course of action (a hedonist is a person who seeks pleasure above all else; like many other terms, it comes from the Greek *hedone*, 'pleasure').

**Hedonism:** From the Greek word for pleasure, *hēdonē*, it is a philosophical position which holds that pleasure is the ultimate good in life.

Bentham listed seven factors which must be taken into account when calculating the actual amount of pleasure an act will produce. They included 'intensity' (the strength of a pleasure), 'duration' (the length of the pleasure) and 'fecundity' (how likely one pleasure was to lead to more pleasures). The calculus is a distinctive feature of Bentham's version of utilitarianism. Significantly, it maintains that ethical decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis; thus it is known as **act utilitarianism**.

**Act Utilitarianism:** The theory which holds that the right *action* is the one which maximises pleasure and minimises pain.

	Measure of Happiness	Definition
1	Intensity	How intense or weak the happiness is
2	Duration	How long the happiness will last for
3	Certainty	How likely or unlikely the happiness is to occur
4	Propinquity/Remoteness	How near or remote in time the happiness is
5	Fecundity/Richness	How likely or unlikely the happiness is to reoccur or lead to further happiness
6	Purity	How free from pain the happiness is
7	Extent	How far the happiness will reach

## Analysis of Act Utilitarianism

### Weaknesses

Happiness cannot be quantified (made measurable) in the way the hedonic calculus assumes – happiness is far more complex and subtle than the hedonic calculus allows.

It is too simplistic to apply to the complexities of ethical decision making and the different types of ethical situation that arise; one principle is not sufficient for this.

Other values are arguably more important than happiness, such as justice or developing virtue. Vardy argues that 'If the word "virtuous" is held to have meaning apart from the greatest happiness principle, then utilitarianism as a theory or morality may well be a failure'.<sup>31</sup> It also denied virtues considered important in Christianity, such as charity, compassion and humility.

It also does not consider the motive or intention of individuals to have any moral significance.

Different people have different opinions on what will be most pleasurable. There are also different views on how much pain might be sufferable for a later benefit. There is a lot of subjectivity in what would constitute the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. Vardy gives an example to explain this of how some people might be willing to suffer diets and difficult exercise to lose weight, whereas others would not – it is simply a matter of personal opinion.<sup>32</sup>

Without knowledge of the future, humans are unable to know, or accurately predict, whether any of these measures of happiness will be achieved through their actions.

Act utilitarianism could justify any kind of action, as long as it produces a balance of happiness over pain for the majority. This could include actions widely considered to be immoral, such as humiliating or torturing several people for the enjoyment of the majority. MacIntyre argues that it could even justify the Nazis' attitudes towards the Jews if it could be shown to benefit the majority.<sup>33</sup>

There is no protection of justice for minority groups in society. John Rawls argues that happiness could be unfairly distributed between minorities and the majority:

*The striking feature of justice is that it does not matter, except indirectly, how the sum of satisfactions is distributed among individuals any more than it matters, except indirectly, how one man distributes his satisfactions over time.*<sup>34</sup>

This is particularly *unconscionable* today with the wide commitment to equality, minority rights and the human rights of all people.

### Strengths

Maximising happiness and minimising pain is arguably how most people already live their lives and it is seen as desirable. This makes it practical and relevant to people's lives. This also means it is a popular and widely acceptable ethical theory. Robert E Goodin argues that Bentham's theory is based on the fact that most people pursue hedonism.<sup>35</sup>

The hedonic calculus is easy to use and provides a clear, practical measure and tool for thinking about happiness and exactly what kind of happiness should be pursued.

#### Activity:

- Using the ethical situation you used to apply to the principle of utility (page 25), develop your answer in reference to the hedonic calculus. Rank the intended outcome of your action with a score of 1–5 for each of the measures on the hedonic calculus.



<sup>31</sup> Vardy, P and Grosche, P, *The Puzzle of Ethics* (London: Harper Collins), p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> Vardy, P and Grosche, P, *The Puzzle of Ethics* (London: Harper Collins), p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Bowie, R, *Ethical Studies* (Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd, 2004), p. 46

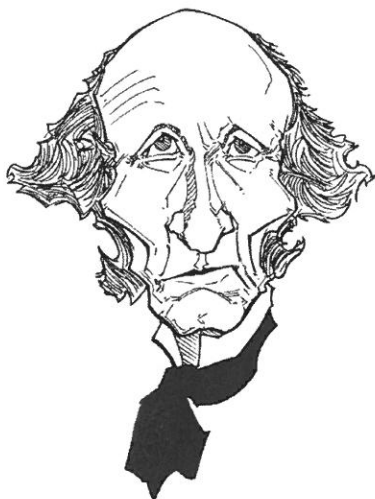
<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Bowie, R, *Ethical Studies* (Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd, 2004), p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Goodin, R E, 'Utility and the Good' in *A Companion to Ethics* edited by P Singer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993).

It would only allow extreme actions in extreme situations. It could, for example, justify torture but only if, say, it was a choice between torturing one person and killing five others. Such situations are obviously rare but act utilitarianism provides the flexibility to respond in the most appropriate way.

Act utilitarianism's focus on the majority is similar to **democracy**, which is widely upheld as the best way to govern a country. It ensures the wants of a minority are not allowed to dominate and take away from the majority.

## Mill's Utilitarianism



James Mill

### Higher/Lower Pleasures

Bentham was Mill's godfather, although the two men had rather different characters. Mill's father, James Mill, was himself a utilitarian philosopher and economist who was keen that his son be capable of carrying on his intellectual legacy. As a result, Mill's childhood was devoted almost entirely to learning; he was studying Greek at age 3, Latin at age 8, and by his mid-teens was well acquainted with the works of Plato, Aristotle, the classical Greek poets, and also a number of Victorian economists. In his spare time, he had also managed to develop a solid grounding in higher mathematics, logic and the natural sciences. He was, however, to suffer a mental breakdown in his early twenties, which he attributed to the abnormally rigorous educational regime he was subjected to by his father. Mill was said to have only recovered with the help of Wordsworth's romantic poetry.

#### Higher Pleasures:

Pleasures which help people to reach their full intellectual potential.

#### Lower Pleasures:

Pleasures which help people fulfil their basic needs and urges.

Mill's sensibilities are reflected in his more nuanced account of pleasure. For Bentham, all pleasures were in a sense equal, it was simply a case of quantities. Mill, on the other hand, is much more concerned with the *quality* of pleasure. His thought was that there is something different about pleasures of the mind such as art, literature and philosophy, and bodily pleasures such as sex or drink. It's the difference between a fine cut of beef expertly prepared in a Michelin-starred restaurant, and a 99p cheeseburger from a disreputable burger van.

Mill states the test for determining whether a pleasure is of a higher quality than another as follows:

*Pleasure P1 is more desirable than pleasure P2 if: all or almost all people who have had experience of both give a decided preference to P1, irrespective of any feeling that they ought to prefer it. (Util. Ch2)*

#### Activity:

4. In groups or as a class, make a list of the activities you find pleasurable. Then apply the test above. Which are the higher pleasures, and which the lower?



#### However...

Is it not a little idealistic to suppose that people will always choose, for example, going to the opera over a bucket of chicken and *Coronation Street*? Indeed, might it be the case that often the so-called lower pleasures are far easier to satisfy (in terms of both availability and effort) than the higher ones? For example, appreciating a dense work of high modernism such as James Joyce's experimental novel *Ulysses* requires not only a significant investment of time but also considerable intellectual resolve (it's not an easy read!). Is it not far less effort and far quicker to just watch an Adam Sandler movie for a few cheap laughs?

It is often the case that those with the greatest sensibilities, who are intellectually refined and possess an idealistic temperament, are also the most likely to succumb to melancholy (as Mill himself did). Is it not in fact better to have only those desires which are most easily fulfilled? Why torture yourself for art or the intellect when you can have an easier life just getting drunk and watching television?

In a famous passage, Mill responds to this objection by arguing that there is a distinction between *happiness* and *contentment*. Those who are better able to use the 'higher faculties', Mill claims, may be less content but they are still happier. This is because they know of a *greater* happiness which is *unavailable* to those who are satisfied only by the lower pleasures. Those who have access to both kinds of pleasure know immediately how much finer it is. They are the cat that does not want to go back to milk now it has tasted cream. As Mill puts it: *'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig think otherwise, that is because they know only their own side of the question.'* (Util, Ch2, p. 7)

#### Activity:

5. Make a list of activities that you consider to be higher and lower pleasures.

Compare your list to someone else's. Are they the same? If not, discuss what problems this may create for the workability of rule utilitarianism.



## Rule Utilitarianism

Another aspect of Bentham's philosophy that Mill rejected outright was the former's 'utility calculus'. Mill argued that happiness was 'much too complex and indefinite' to be calculated in every ethical situation. Therefore, he thought rules should be developed which guide moral agents as to what will result in happiness. These rules would be developed through trial and error, rather than the utility calculus. For example, lying or hitting others nearly always causes unhappiness, therefore we could develop the rules 'do not lie' and 'do not hit'.

Followed en masse by everyone in society, these rules will generate, on the whole, the most happiness and the least pain for the greatest number of people.

**Rule Utilitarianism:** The theory which holds that the right action is one which follows rules that, if universally obeyed, would create the maximum amount of happiness and the minimum amount of pain.

**Happiness or pleasure?** It is sometimes mistakenly said that Bentham equated utility with pleasure, while Mill equated it with happiness. This is not correct. Both Mill and Bentham equated happiness with pleasure; Mill, however, measures pleasure **qualitatively** (in terms of its *quality*), whereas Bentham measures it **quantitatively** (in terms of its *quantity*).

This means that Bentham was really only concerned with *how much* pleasure you could have and how little pain. Being high on narcotics 24 hours a day, 7 days of week, 365 days a year would not, in Bentham's view, be a bad way to live (provided there were no ill consequences). Mill, on the other hand, would say something is missing from a life devoted purely to sensual pleasure.

Nevertheless, both also argued that the only good in life *is* pleasure or happiness, a position known as **hedonism**. Don't be surprised, then, to see Mill refer to the principle of utility as 'the Greatest Happiness' principle; they amount to the same thing.

## Analysis of Rule Utilitarianism

### Strengths

- ◆ It recognises that we have a strong internal conviction that an action cannot be right purely because it produces happiness – other principles are also important that need to be considered.
- ◆ Rule utilitarianism is easier to apply in ethical decision-making than act utilitarianism because there are clear rules to follow.
- ◆ It removes the need to work out how best to apply the principle of utility in every situation, which could be difficult and time-consuming.
- ◆ It still allows some flexibility with the notion of strong and weak utilitarianism.

### Weaknesses

- ◆ Henry Sidgwick raises questions about how moral agents are supposed to be able to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures. Mill does not provide a way to categorise pleasures in this way, although any such categorisation would presumably be subjective.
- ◆ The focus on rules removes the benefits of situationalism and consequentialism. Therefore, the results in the principle of utility may not be the consequence of following rule utilitarianism.
- ◆ There is the difficulty of knowing when rules can be broken in order to achieve the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. This means the need for lengthy analysis about how to behave has not been removed – simply shifted.

#### Exam Prep AO1

Make a list of the key features of utilitarianism.



## Further Developments

### Preference Utilitarianism

Preference utilitarianism developed out of the work of Bentham and Mill, but it avoided one key difficulty that both philosophers' theories faced. To get a handle on this problem, consider the following:

*Let me introduce myself, I am Professor Lethe and I have invented a most fabulous machine. This device, which I call Lethe's HedoneDome, is able, through some rather complex neuroscientific whatnots that I shan't go into, to grant its user the ability to experience a lifetime of unadulterated pleasure! Now, whether you wish to live the life of an emperor in Ancient Rome, or that of a libertine prince in an unseemly palace of carnal delights, or perhaps simply to while away your days serenely contemplating matters of the mind, I shall not judge – your choice of pleasure is yours and yours alone. What's more, my device will erase every memory you ever had of this dreary, pain-begotten planet and let you live in the HedoneDome as if you had been born there! Imagine knowing no pain but only pleasure, and knowing neither boredom nor satiation but instead to feel that each waking moment can never be surpassed! The only catch – if it can be called that – is that you can never return. Once you enter the cave, you stay in the cave. Until the end of your days. All I need is my first volunteer, now come, step inside...*

This thought experiment was first devised by Robert Nozick in his 1974 work *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, where he called devices such as the HedoneDome, 'Experience Machines'. He intended them as a critique of both act and rule utilitarianism because both endorse **hedonism**. Nozick thought that people would not choose to abandon reality for a life of pure pleasure. He argued that people place some inherent value in *being connected to reality*. Mill cannot get around this by objecting that 'being connected to reality' is some kind of higher pleasure because we would think the HedoneDome was *reality* (remember: Professor Lethe said you would forget all about the real world and live as if you had been born in the HedoneDome). Any higher pleasure is just as possible in the machine as it is in reality. But if people would choose not to go into the machine this suggests they value something *other* than pleasure. That, in a stroke, defeats hedonism, because it shows that not everything can be reduced to pleasure; other things are valuable too.

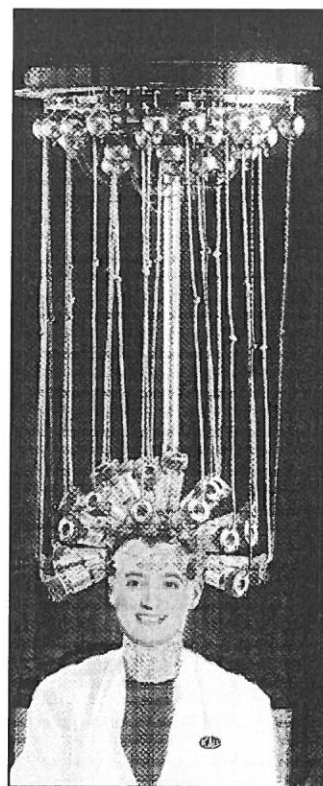
### From Pleasure to Preference

Later utilitarians were aware of problems such as this and decided that, rather than talking about the maximisation of pleasure, they should talk about the maximisation of *preferences*.

A preference is just what somebody wants or desires. Sometimes, it might be the case that satisfying a preference does not bring somebody pleasure. For instance, satisfying our preference to stay in reality might not always bring us the most pleasure but it is our preference nonetheless. Perhaps this is why some people prefer sobriety; they know getting drunk might be fun, but ultimately, they think, it isn't *real*.

#### Strengths:

- ◆ It is easier to take into account preferences because people can clearly state what their preference is in a situation.
- ◆ It is easier to satisfy preferences as identified at that time than try to achieve lasting happiness in the future.
- ◆ It takes into account when preferences might not be happiness but something else considered more valuable or serving a greater purpose, such as a person's preference for justice.



#### Discussion:

6. Would you step inside Professor Lethe's Pleasure Cave? Why might this thought experiment be problematic for utilitarians?

#### Preference:

Something that is more desirable or better liked than something else.

**Preference Utilitarianism:** Holds that the right action is the one which satisfies the greatest number of people's

### Weaknesses:

- ◆ There could be difficulties in making decisions between conflicting or complicated preferences.
- ◆ We do not recognise the preference of certain individuals on moral grounds, such as the wish of terminally ill people to die because of concerns about active euthanasia.
- ◆ Some people might not be able to express their true preference, such as mentally ill people or individuals who lack knowledge of the situation. This could mean judgements need to be made about who is making an informed statement of preference.

### Stretch and Challenge



#### Should *All* Preferences be Satisfied?

One criticism that can be levelled at preference utilitarianism is that it could make it morally right to allow people to satisfy some downright dangerous desires. If my sole aim in life is to stick pins into every square centimetre of my body, then according to a preference utilitarian it would be morally right to allow me to satisfy that preference. Yet surely such a preference is evidence of some underlying mental illness, or at any rate, is hard to consider as a good way to live. The case is even stronger for those with severe depression whose preference is to commit suicide. Examples like this raise the question of whether it is good to satisfy *all* preferences or only some. If the latter, the preference utilitarian faces the difficult, if not impossible task of deciding which preferences we can call good.

### Negative Utilitarianism

Negative utilitarianism is hedonism's pessimistic cousin. While the hedonist seeks to maximise pleasure *and* to minimise pain, the negative utilitarian seeks only to reduce the amount of suffering in the world. In the words of David Pearce, a prominent contemporary negative utilitarian, this position '... attaches value in a distinctively moral sense of the term only to actions which tend to minimise or eliminate suffering'. (*The Hedonistic Imperative*, Ch.2)

Moral perfection for the negative utilitarian is not everybody being happy, but nobody being in pain. As Pearce puts it: 'No amount of happiness or fun enjoyed by some organisms can notionally justify the indescribable horrors of Auschwitz. Nor can it outweigh the sporadic frightfulness of pain and despair that occurs every second of every day.' (*Ibid.*) An odd consequence of adopting this view is that, ethically speaking, it would be morally better were the world simply not to exist. If there is nothing *to* suffer, then we cannot, morally, make the situation any better: it is as good as it can be.

Practically speaking, however, negative utilitarians do not seek to bring an end to the world but rather to those things in the world which cause misery to sentient beings. As a result, much hope is placed in the potential of technological advancement in areas such as genetic engineering and pharmaceuticals to rid the planet of suffering. Whether such potential can in fact be translated into concrete change is, then, where the theory will stand or fall.

### Strengths

- ◆ There are more ways to do harm than good so the focus should be on avoiding harm.
- ◆ Harm is more important to avoid than it is to achieve happiness. Someone would rather ensure against pain before pursuing happiness.

### Weaknesses

- ◆ Some people have argued that the logical conclusion of negative utilitarianism is that, in order to avoid suffering, the most effective way is to ensure the painless death of mankind!
- ◆ It does not recognise that some suffering might be valuable – such as to achieve a greater cause, to gain compassion and understanding for others who are suffering, and to generally encourage human development and create a life that is meaningful.
- ◆ Negative utilitarianism may also be vulnerable to 'experience machine' objections: if the aim is just to avoid pain, does it matter if we are no more than brains in vats?

## Ideal Utilitarianism

A somewhat obscure variation on the theme, ideal utilitarianism was historically advocated by G E Moore. Instead of seeking to maximise pleasure or minimise pain or fulfil preferences, ideal utilitarians hold that the right action is the one which maximises certain intrinsically (that is, non-consequentially) good qualities. Since these qualities are **intrinsically** good, it does not actually matter how people feel about them. This is the polar opposite of Bentham, whose philosophy holds that the *only* morally significant feature of any action is how people feel about the consequences (i.e. whether they feel pleasure, or pain).



G E Moore

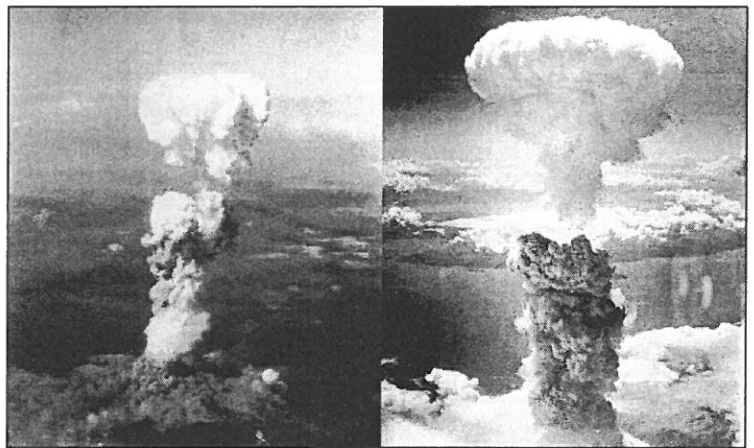
## Historical and Contemporary Applications of Utilitarian Reasoning

It is not insignificant that many of the major thinkers associated with utilitarianism did not spend their entire lives in the study, but instead tried to use their philosophical ideas to enact changes out in the real world. Bentham was a legal reformer, while Mill was a civil servant and, later, a Member of Parliament. Peter Singer, meanwhile, is a key figure in the animal liberation movement and has stood as a candidate for the Australian senate.

Utilitarianism is, above all else, a theory concerned with real-world consequences, so it is perhaps unsurprising that it has left such a large imprint on public life and continues to influence the thinking of policy makers to this day. Overleaf are three prominent examples of utilitarianism in action.

### The USA's Use of Nuclear Weapons in WWII

Towards the end of the Second World War, the United States had in its possession the most devastating weapon yet devised by humankind: the atomic bomb. The president at the time, Harry Truman, was fully aware of the new technology's potential for mass destruction and loss of life. Engaged in a long-term conflict with Imperial Japan, he knew that if he gave the order, tens of thousands of Japanese civilians would die. However, he also believed that his adversaries would not surrender at any cost. The choice, as Truman saw it, was between dropping the bomb and killing tens of thousands, or beginning a lengthy ground invasion that could potentially see hundreds of thousands, if not millions, on both sides die.



Mushroom cloud from a nuclear bomb

The bombing of Hiroshima on the 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1945 left over 100,000 dead. Three days later, the city of Nagasaki was all but annihilated. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, Japan's Emperor Hirohito offered his unconditional surrender. To this day, it is not known precisely how many were killed either on the day of the attacks, or as a result of radiation sickness. Whether Truman made the right or wrong decision is still a matter of great debate,

and something which will be returned to when the ethics of war are studied in Section 3.1. What we can say for certain is that the President's decision was made on utilitarian grounds: by dropping the bomb, Truman, somewhat counter-intuitively, hoped to minimise loss of life, and hence to end the war with the minimum amount of pain.

Such reasoning could only be employed by a **consequentialist**; the Catholic philosopher G E M Anscombe condemned the action and considered Truman to be no more than a mass murderer. For her, and for many others, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki represent a clear case of the ends not justifying the means.

## Triage and Quality-Adjusted Life Years (QALYs)

During major emergencies, such as in the aftermath of a powerful earthquake or a mass shooting, medics are often faced with multiple injured persons, all requiring treatment. To decide who receives care first, a system known as **triage** is employed. Casualties are assessed and priority is given to those who are most severely injured, while assistance is delayed for those with minor injuries or who are so badly wounded that even if they are treated they are still likely to die. The underlying utilitarian reasoning here is clear: the greatest amount of pleasure is created by prioritising those who may die without immediate medical intervention; those with lesser injuries may still be in considerable pain, but this pales in comparison to the pleasure that will be generated by saving a life.

Utilitarian reasoning can also be found in the medical profession at a more strategic level. In a country such as the UK, which has a large medical system and millions of patients to treat, there are times when healthcare providers must decide where best to allocate their limited resources. The concept of **quality-adjusted life years** (QALYs) was developed to help with this task. QALYs are a quantitative measure of how effective some proposed treatment is likely to be. They take into account two key factors: (i) how much longer a person is expected to live if they receive the treatment, and (ii) the quality of life they can expect in those remaining years. Crucially, quality of life is given a score between 0 and 1, where 1 is equivalent to a year of perfect health and 0 is equivalent to death. As such, a year of poor health scored at 0.5 is equivalent to only one year of perfect health.

For example, a hospital may be offered two revolutionary new treatments but only has a budget large enough to supply one of them to patients. Let us say Treatment A is able to completely cure a rare form of life-threatening epilepsy, and Treatment B is able to curtail some, but not all, of the effects of Alzheimer's disease. Assume also, for simplicity's sake, that both treatments cost exactly the same amount and will be used on only one patient: either a 10-year-old girl or a 68-year-old woman.

The hospital may look at the situation as follows: if we provide Treatment A, it will prevent a 10-year-old girl from dying and, if life is kinder to her than it has been up to this point, she may be able to look forward to over 70 years of perfect health. However, if we purchase Treatment B, we will ensure that one 68-year-old woman's remaining decade on this earth is marginally better than it would otherwise have been. Deciding which generates the greatest amount of pleasure is not a difficult task.

This example is grossly simplified, but it illustrates the utilitarian reasoning behind the process: as with Bentham's **hedonic calculus**, a series of numerical values is used to score the amount of pleasure created by a given action. This calculation is then the basis for making the 'correct' decision. Moreover, the decision is made on consequentialist grounds (what is *expected* to happen in the future) and it is a relativist procedure, reliant not on absolute moral rules, but on the particularities of the situation.

## Effective Altruism

Effective Altruism is a contemporary movement whose mission is 'to foster projects which use *evidence* and *analysis* to help others *as much as possible*', with the ultimate aim of creating 'a world where everyone is *healthy, happy, fulfilled* and free'. The philosophers associated with the group, the most famous of which is Peter Singer, generally work from a utilitarian basis. As far back as 1972, Singer has argued the best-off are morally obliged to give up as much as they can to charitable causes, until such point that giving would cause more harm than to not give:

*If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we ought, morally, to do it. (Famine, Affluence and Morality)*

The movement largely targets affluent, highly-educated Westerners who possess both expendable income and humanitarian feeling. Campaigns such as '80,000 hours' offer bespoke career advice to 'exceptional individuals' so that they are able to choose the career which best allows them to make the world a better place, while 'Giving What We Can' encourages individuals to pledge 10% of their salary to the most efficient charitable causes. The utilitarian reasoning here is evident: when choosing which charities to donate to, or which career to follow, we should base our decision on the extent to which it maximises pleasure and minimises pain. Effective Altruism also embodies the pragmatism and relativism which is so characteristic of utilitarianism: the world is deeply unfair, but we cannot change that; let us, instead, do as best we can in the here-and-now.

## Further Analysis

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### Conflict with partiality?

Utilitarianism demands that in making moral decisions, the individual must be impartial – show no bias or preference for certain people. This means that in applying utilitarianism, moral agents are not allowed to give special consideration to the happiness of friends and family. It would thus be wrong to do something to make a friend happy that would make two strangers unhappy. This impartiality is therefore in conflict with the duty and partiality we feel we owe friends and family. This makes it an impractical ethic because it would be very hard for moral agents to show impartiality.

### Is it compatible with religious approaches to morality?

Utilitarianism is largely inconsistent with religious morality because it does not interpret God to be the source of moral knowledge.

The value of happiness and pleasure is also contrary to many Christian teachings which often teach the value of suffering, such as was demonstrated by the suffering of Jesus on the Cross.

Christian ethics, such as situation ethics (which you will study in the next section), emphasises the importance of showing love to one's neighbour, rather than happiness. Similarly, Catholic ethical teaching through natural moral law emphasises obedience to religious laws, and strongly rejects teleological and relativist understandings of morality.

### Is it relevant today?

#### *Yes*

- ◆ Utilitarianism is compatible with today's secularist views.
- ◆ Many people pursue happiness and pleasure today which are seen as important values.
- ◆ Utilitarianism's teaching on the importance of the majority in making decisions is shared in democratic values widely upheld today.
- ◆ Utilitarianism shaped political attitudes at the time, such as towards the poor, that remain today.

#### *No*

- ◆ Society today believes strongly in the principles of justice, rights and the protection of minorities which is not reflected in utilitarianism.

## Quick Quiz

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1. What does 'utility' mean?
2. What statement summarises the utilitarian principle of utility?
3. Name four utilitarian philosophers.
4. Is act utilitarianism teleological or deontological? Define what these terms mean.
5. Name two legal changes that resulted from changes in attitudes related to utilitarianism.
6. Name the seven measures of happiness in the hedonic calculus.
7. What did Mill mean when he said 'Quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry'?
8. Summarise preference utilitarianism in one sentence.
9. Does utilitarianism encourage partiality or impartiality? What do these terms mean?

## More on Moore

Yet how do we decide what is intrinsically good? Moore claims we must 'consider what things are such that, if they existed *by themselves*, in absolute isolation, we should yet judge their existence to be good' (*Principia Ethica*, Ch. VI). The candidates he suggests as fulfilling this criteria are 'pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects' because 'No one... has ever doubted that personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature, are good in themselves; nor, if we consider strictly what things are worth having *purely for their own sakes*, does it appear probable that any one will think that anything else has *nearly* so great a value as the things which are included under these two heads.' (*Ibid.*)

To demonstrate why a quality like beauty is an intrinsic good, Moore asks us to consider two worlds, both entirely devoid of human beings. In one world, all is beautiful, and nothing is out of place: the air is fragrant, the sky clear, the sun shining, while soothing birdsong is carried to and fro by a gentle breeze. In the other world, however, everything is monstrously ugly, foul odours abound, rotting fruit and decaying carcasses litter the floor, and a general din of agonised screeching prevails. Which world, Moore asked, strikes us as better? Surely, even though we cannot live there, it is the beautiful world we would prefer to exist. Therefore, Moore concludes, beauty is intrinsically good.

Moore then proposes a similar thought experiment to demonstrate why pleasure is *not* intrinsically good. Imagine two worlds: one populated by gruesome sadists, who take great delight in wanton cruelty and sexual violence. Fortunately, in this world, nobody experiences any pain, so the sadism generates only pleasure for its instigators, and no misery for its victims. Now consider a world which is completely unpopulated, and hence contains neither pleasure nor pain. Which would we rather exist? Surely, Moore thinks, we would rather have a world with nothing at all than one populated solely by euphoric psychopaths, even if they can get off without causing any harm. If we prefer a world without any pleasure at all to one in which pleasure is in abundance, this implies we do not consider pleasure to be intrinsically good. We consider it good only **instrumentally**, as a means to some other end.

It is worth noting that Moore's conception of intrinsic goods is holistic, which is to say, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. While experiencing something as good is not the be-all and end-all (as Bentham thought) it is not irrelevant either. Consider three scenarios:

- (i) A supremely beautiful world exists but since it is unpopulated, nobody can experience it.
- (ii) A man in a rundown bedsit has taken a high dose of LSD and is having the most wondrous visions.
- (iii) The supremely beautiful world exists and we have all been invited to come and look around.

Moore would claim that (i) and (ii) both have some value: (i) has value because it is good simply for beauty to exist and (ii) has value because it is good to *experience* beauty, even if it is hallucinatory. However, (iii) has the greatest value because it is able to successfully combine the experience of beauty and its independent existence. Moore termed this the 'organic unity' of value, and it enables him to avoid 'experience machine' objections like those proposed by Nozick and captures our intuition that an illusory sense of good is incomparable to a bona fide experience.

### Strengths

- ◆ Moore is able to side step 'experience machine'-style objections. He argues that the experience of beauty is better when the beautiful object actually exists, rather than being imaginary or implanted in the mind by a machine.
- ◆ Ideal utilitarianism also captures Mill's thought that not all goods are equal. Clearly, we intuitively judge the joy an individual gets from a loving relationship or a fine piece of music differently to the thrill a sadist gets from their dark perversions.

### Weaknesses

- ◆ Moore's notion of 'intrinsic goods' and the arguments he uses to establish them are contentious. Would we necessarily prefer a world of beauty to a world of ugliness? Can what is monstrous to one not be astounding to another? Margaret Thatcher referred to the expressionist painter Francis Bacon as 'that man who paints those dreadful pictures'. Yet his art, although dark and disturbing, is beloved the world over. One might argue instead that all aesthetic taste is inherently subjective ('different strokes for different folks') and beauty is not an objective part of the world. Moore would, naturally, disagree, and point to his arguments (not discussed here) about why judgements about beauty can be objectively true or false.



Excerpt from Hieronymus Bosch's  
The Last Judgement