

# Utilitarianism

**Phil. 321**  
**Social Ethics**  
Summer 2010

Lawrence M. Hinman  
Professor of Philosophy  
University of San Diego

# Overview

1. Fundamental Tenets of Utilitarianism
2. Standards of Utility/History of Utilitarianism
3. The Utilitarian Calculus
4. Act and Rule Utilitarianism
5. Criticisms of Utilitarianism
6. Concluding Assessment

# Part One

## Fundamental Tenets of Utilitarianism

# Fundamental Imperative: Maximize the Overall Good

The fundamental imperative of utilitarianism is:

**Always act in the way that will produce the greatest overall amount of good in the world.**

- The **purpose of morality is** to make the world a better place. Morality is about producing good consequences, not having good intentions
- We should do whatever will bring the ***most*** benefit (i.e., intrinsic value) to all of humanity.

# The Dream of Utilitarianism: Bringing Scientific Certainty to Ethics

Utilitarianism offers us a powerful vision of the moral life, one that promises to reduce or eliminate moral disagreement.

- If we can agree that the purpose of morality is to make the world a better place; and
- If we can scientifically assess various possible courses of action to determine which will have the greatest positive effect on the world; then
- We can provide a scientific answer to the question of what we ought to do.

# The Morally Demanding Character of Utilitarianism

We often speak of “utilitarian” solutions in a disparaging tone, but in fact utilitarianism is a demanding moral position that often asks us to put aside self-interest for the sake of the whole.

Utilitarianism is a *morally demanding* position for two reasons:

- It always asks us to do the most, to maximize utility, not to do the minimum.
- It asks us to set aside personal interest.

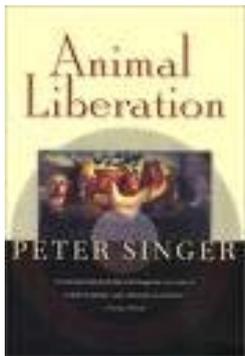
# A Contemporary Utilitarian: Peter Singer

Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at  
Princeton University

- Website:  
<http://www.princeton.edu/~psinger/>

His work—whether one likes it or not—  
typifies utilitarianism at its purest.

Concern with **animal suffering**. (*Animal  
Liberation*, 1975)



Concern with **world hunger**

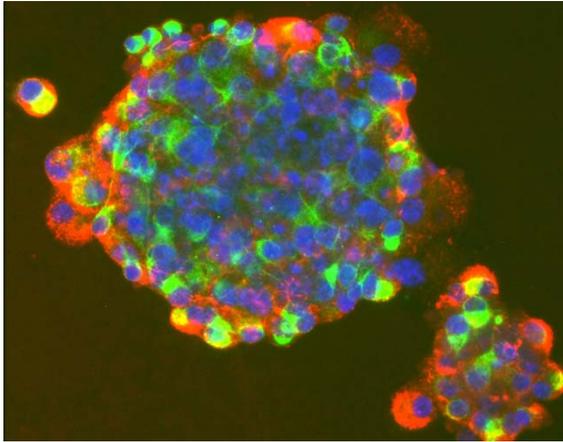
- **Killing and letting die**
- Animal suffering

**Euthanasia** of severely deformed newborns

Lives out his commitments in his life



# Stem Cell Research



**Stem cell research provides an interesting case for utilitarians.**

- 400,000+ “abandoned” embryos in U. S. fertility clinics
- Is it morally wrong to use these for research to cure particularly debilitating diseases for which there are no current cures?
  - ***Especially if they are going to be destroyed anyway?***

# Part Two.

## Standards of Utility: A History of Utilitarianism

# Intrinsic Value

Many things have *instrumental value*, that is, they have value as means to an end.

However, there must be some things which are not merely instrumental, but have value in themselves. This is what we call *intrinsic value*.

What has intrinsic value? Four principal candidates:

- Pleasure
  - Jeremy Bentham
- Happiness
  - John Stuart Mill
- Ideals
  - G. E. Moore
- Preferences
  - Kenneth Arrow

# Jeremy Bentham

## 1748-1832

Bentham believed that we should try to increase the overall amount of pleasure in the



# Pleasure

**Definition:** The enjoyable feeling we experience when a state of deprivation is replaced by fulfillment.

## Advantages

- Easy to quantify
- Short duration
- Bodily

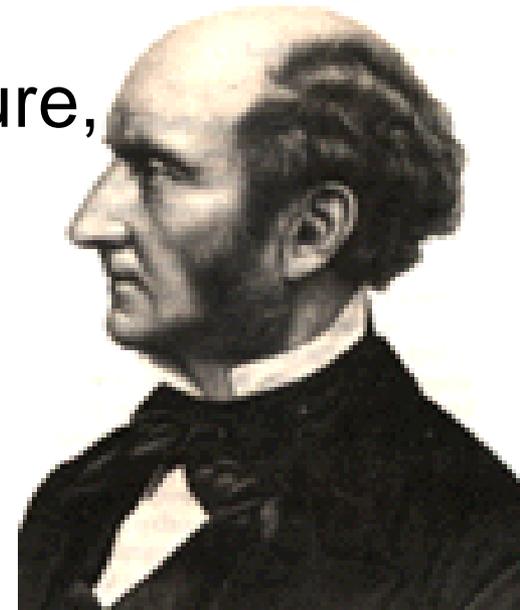
## Criticisms

- Came to be known as “the pig’s philosophy”
- Ignores higher values
- Could justify living on a pleasure machine

# John Stuart Mill

## 1806-1873

- Bentham's godson
- Believed that happiness, not pleasure, be the standard of utility.



# Happiness

## Advantages

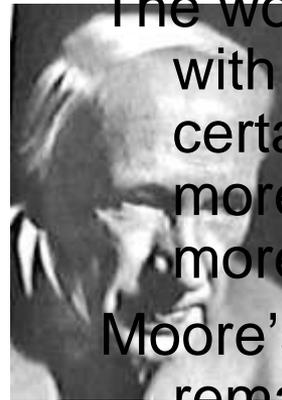
- A higher standard, more specific to humans
- About realization of goals

## Disadvantages

- More difficult to measure
- Competing conceptions of happiness

# Ideal Values

**G. E. Moore** suggested that we should strive to maximize ideal values such as freedom, knowledge, justice, and beauty.



The world may not be a better place with more pleasure in it, but it certainly will be a better place with more freedom, more knowledge, more justice, and more beauty.

Moore's candidates for intrinsic good remain difficult to quantify.

**G. E. Moore**  
**1873-1958**

# Preferences

**Kenneth Arrow**, a Nobel Prize winning Stanford economist, argued that what has intrinsic value is preferences. The advantage of Arrow's approach is that, in choosing for themselves what has intrinsic value, we define intrinsic value as whatever satisfies preferences. It is elegant and pluralistic.



# Part Three.

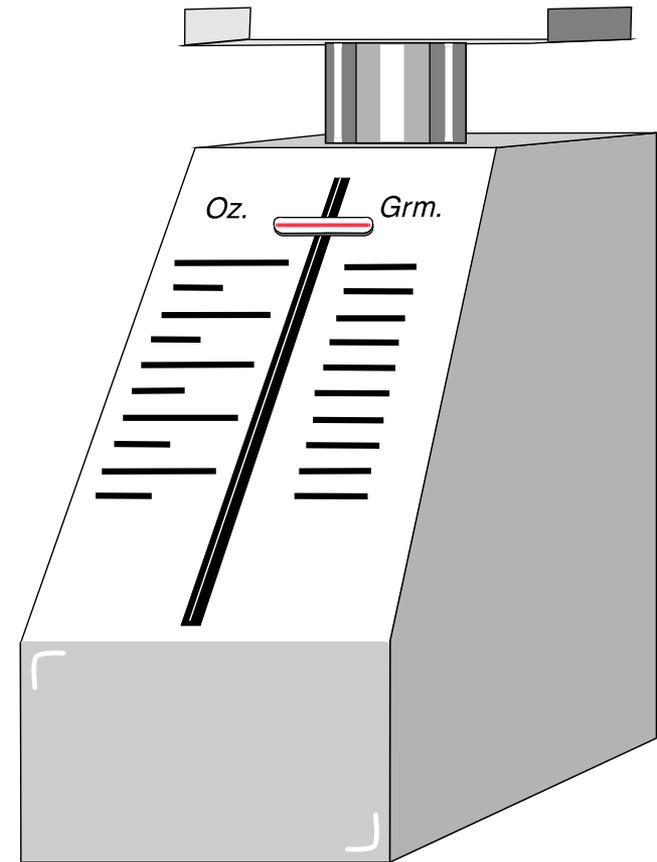
## The Utilitarian Calculus

# The Utilitarian Calculus

Math and ethics finally merge: all consequences must be measured and weighed.

Units of measurement:

- **Hedons**: positive
- **Dolors**: negative



# What do we calculate?

Hedons/dolors may be defined in terms of

- Pleasure
- Happiness
- Ideals
- Preferences

For any given action, we must calculate:

- How many people will be affected, negatively (dolors) as well as positively (hedons)
- How intensely they will be affected
- Similar calculations for all available alternatives
- Choose the action that produces the greatest overall amount of utility (hedons minus dolors)

# Example: Debating the school lunch program

Utilitarians would have to calculate:

- **Benefits**
  - Increased nutrition for x number of children
  - Increased performance, greater long-range chances of success
  - Incidental benefits to contractors, etc.
- **Costs**
  - Cost to each taxpayer
  - Contrast with other programs that could have been funded and with lower taxes (no program)
- **Multiply each factor by**
  - Number of individuals affected
  - Intensity of effects

# How much can we quantify?

Pleasure and preference satisfaction are easier to quantify than happiness or ideals

Two distinct issues:

- **Can everything be quantified?**
  - Some would maintain that some of the most important things in life (love, family, etc.) cannot easily be quantified, while other things (productivity, material goods) may get emphasized precisely because they are quantifiable.
  - The danger: if it can't be counted, it doesn't count.
- **Are quantified goods necessarily commensurable?**
  - Are a fine dinner and a good night's sleep commensurable? Can one be traded or substituted for the other?

# Part Four

## Act and Rule Utilitarianism

# Act and Rule Utilitarianism

## **Act utilitarianism**

- Looks at the consequences of each individual act and calculate utility each time the act is performed.

## **Rule utilitarianism**

- Looks at the consequences of having everyone follow a particular rule and calculates the overall utility of accepting or rejecting the rule.

# An Example

Imagine the following scenario. A prominent and much-loved leader has been rushed to the hospital, grievously wounded by an assassin's bullet. He needs a heart and lung transplant immediately to survive. No suitable donors are available, but there is a homeless person in the emergency room who is being kept alive on a respirator, who probably has only a few days to live, and who is a perfect donor. Without the transplant, the leader will die; the homeless person will die in a few days anyway. Security at the hospital is very well controlled. The transplant team could hasten the death of the homeless person and carry out the transplant without the public ever knowing that they killed the homeless person for his organs. What should they do?

- For **rule utilitarians**, this is an easy choice. No one could approve a general rule that lets hospitals kill patients for their organs when they are going to die anyway. The consequences of adopting such a general rule would be highly negative and would certainly undermine public trust in the medical establishment.
- For **act utilitarians**, the situation is more complex. If secrecy were guaranteed, the overall consequences might be such that in this particular instance greater utility is produced by hastening the death of the homeless person and using his organs for the transplant.

# The Continuing Dispute

## Rule utilitarians claim:

- In particular cases, act utilitarianism can justify disobeying important moral rules and violating individual rights.
- Act utilitarianism also takes too much time to calculate in each and every case.

## Act utilitarians respond:

- Following a rule in a particular case when the overall utility demands that we violate the rule is just rule-worship. If the consequences demand it, we should violate the rule.
- Furthermore, act utilitarians can follow rules-of-thumb (accumulated wisdom based on consequences in the past) most of the time and engage in individual calculation only when there is some pressing reason for doing so.

# Part Five

## Criticisms of Utilitarianism

1. Responsibility
2. Integrity
3. Intentions
4. Moral Luck
5. Who does the calculating?
6. Who is included?

# 1. Responsibility

**Utilitarianism suggests that we are responsible for all the consequences of our choices.**

The problem is that sometimes we can foresee consequences of other people's actions that are taken in response to our own acts. Are we responsible for those actions, even though we don't choose them or approve of them?

- Discuss Bernard Williams' example of Jim in the village
- Imagine a terrorist situation where the terrorists say that they will kill their hostages if we do not meet their demands. We refuse to meet their demands. Are we responsible for what happens to the hostages?
- Imagine someone like Saddam Hussein putting children in targets likely to be bombed in order to deter bombing by the United States. If we bomb our original targets, are we responsible if those children are killed by our bombing?
- Imagine Hamas hiding among civilian populations.
- Distinction between killing and letting die called into question.

## 2. Integrity

Utilitarianism often demands that we put aside self-interest. Sometimes this means putting aside our own moral convictions.

- Discuss Bernard Williams on the chemist example.
- Develop a variation on Jim in the village, substituting a mercenary soldier and then Martin Luther King, Jr. for Jim. Does this substitution make a difference?

Integrity may involve certain identity-conferring commitments, such that the violation of those commitments entails a violation of who we are at our core.

# 3. Intentions

Utilitarianism is concerned almost exclusively about consequences, not intentions.

- There is a version of utilitarianism called “motive utilitarianism,” developed by Robert Adams, that attempts to correct this.

Intentions may matter is morally assessing an agent, even if they don't matter in terms of guiding action.

# 4. Moral Luck

By concentrating exclusively on consequences, utilitarianism makes the moral worth of our actions a matter of luck. We must await the final consequences before we find out if our action was good or bad.

This seems to make the moral life a matter of chance, which runs counter to our basic moral intuitions.

- We can imagine actions with good intentions that have unforeseeable and unintended bad consequences
- We can also imagine actions with bad intentions that have unforeseeable and unintended good consequences.

## 5. Who does the calculating?

Historically, this was an issue for the British in India. The British felt they wanted to do what was best for India, but that they were the ones to judge what that was.

- See Ragavan Iyer, *Utilitarianism and All That*

Typically, the count differs depending on who does the counting

- In Vietnam, Americans could never understand how much independence counted for the Vietnamese.

## 6. Who is included?

When we consider the issue of consequences, we must ask who is included within that circle.

- Those in our own group (group egoism)
- Those in our own country (nationalism)
- Those who share our skin color (racism)
- All human beings (humanism or speciesism?)
- All sentient beings

Classical utilitarianism has often claimed that we should acknowledge the pain and suffering of animals and not restrict the calculus just to human beings.

# Concluding Assessment

Utilitarianism is most appropriate for policy decisions, as long as a strong notion of fundamental human rights guarantees that it will not violate rights of small minorities.