

## Utilitarianism

Last time, we saw some reason to think that there are some real, objective moral truths. That is, truths about **the good** and **the right** which we do not get to decide—but are, rather, there to be *discovered* by us. Ok, so let's try to discover some of them now.

**1. The Good:** What things are good? By 'good', I just mean, what things are valuable, or worth pursuing? What sorts of things are such that, if you had more of them in your life, your life would be BETTER?

First, I should note that philosophers typically distinguish between two types of good:

- (a) **Intrinsic goods:** These are things that are desirable *for their own sake*. They are *good, in and of themselves*. That is, they are "just plain good".
- (b) **Instrumental goods:** These are things are good because of what they *lead to*. We call them "good" not because they are desirable for *their own sake*, but rather because they make it easier for us to obtain things that ARE desirable for their own sake. In short, instrumental goods are desirable, or worth pursuing, because *they are a means to some truly good end*.

**Money** is a great example of something that is purely **instrumentally good**. It is not just plain good to have money for its own sake. No—it is only valuable to have because it is a *means* to obtaining other good stuff. Money is not desirable for its own sake. If you had a pile of money but could not obtain anything with it, the money would not be of any value.

What is a good candidate for something that is **intrinsically good**? Here's one: **Happiness**. It really does seem true that happiness is desirable for its own sake. It is JUST PLAIN GOOD to have some happiness—not because of what happiness leads to, but because happiness ITSELF is good to have.

Are there any other intrinsic goods? Perhaps love? Or Knowledge? The view that we're going to look at today says, No. Happiness is the ONLY intrinsic good.

**(1) Hedonism:** The view that **happiness**, or pleasure, **is the only thing that is intrinsically good**. All other good things are only *instrumentally* good.

(btw, on the flip side, hedonists think that *pain*, or *suffering*, is the only thing that is intrinsically BAD – i.e., disvaluable for its own sake.)

**2. The Right:** How should we behave in light of our recognition that there is some good (and bad) stuff in the world?

The view that we're going to look at today has a simple answer: You should try to make as much of the good stuff as you can, and prevent as much of the bad stuff as you can! In short, we should always strive for the best world possible.

**(2) Consequentialism:** The view that the morally right action is the one that produces the *best* consequences. (Likewise, the morally wrong action is the one that produces results that are LESS than the best, out of all our available options.)

In short, consequentialists think that, regarding the rightness or wrongness of an action, the **consequences are all that matter**. We do not need to look at anything but the *results* of an action in order to know if that action was right or wrong.

Does that seem correct to you?

**3. For Whom?:** Note that, once we have settled the question of what things are good, and how we ought to behave in relation to the good, there is still the question: **Good for whom?** Do I have a moral duty to promote good stuff for EVERYBODY? For just my family? For just myself? Or what? Today we're looking at a view which says: Everybody.

**(3) Impartiality:** This is the view that **everyone's moral interests count equally**. For example, no one's happiness is more important or more inherently valuable than anyone else's happiness.

On this view, one truly should "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

**4. Utilitarianism:** Utilitarianism, championed by philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and Peter Singer, is the combination of Hedonism, Consequentialism, and Impartiality.

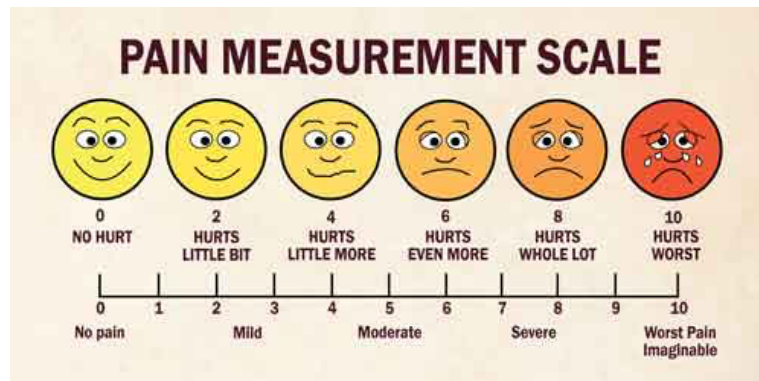
**Utilitarianism:** The morally right action is the one that results in the greatest total amount of happiness minus suffering, where the interests of all individuals affected by one's action are given equal consideration.

In practice, when trying to decide the right course of action, a utilitarian will ideally go through the following steps:

- (1) Identify the Options: First, we determine what all of our choices are.
- (2) Calculate the Overall Balance of Happiness for Each Option: For each alternative, we add up the value of all the happiness that would result from that action, and subtract the value of all the suffering that would result from that action.

- (3) Ensure That the Calculations Account for Everyone Affected: When calculating, we consider everyone's happiness and suffering impartially; that is, we consider the happiness and unhappiness of *everyone* that would be affected, in such a way that no one's happiness is considered more or less important than anyone else's.
- (4) Determine the Right Action: The right action is the one that results in the greatest net value (i.e., total amount of happiness minus total amount of suffering).

This is all, of course, assuming that we can somehow "quantify" pain and pleasure. But, perhaps this is not so implausible. You may have even already done so. The following chart is commonly given to children at a doctor's office, for instance:



## Objections to Utilitarianism

There are several objections to Utilitarianism—specifically, to each of the three major tenets of that view (Hedonism, Consequentialism, and Impartiality).

**5. Objection to Hedonism:** Many disagree with the idea that happiness is the ONLY thing in the world that is "intrinsically good," or good for its own sake. For example, the following things are commonly cited as having value in and of themselves as well:

- Knowledge
- Life
- Love
- Freedom
- Justice
- Beauty
- Friendship
- Equality

*[Can you think of any other things that it might be good to have—not as means to some further good end, but merely for their own sake?]*

In order to illustrate the point that happiness is not all that matters, Robert Nozick told the following story:

**The Experience Machine:** Scientists have invented a virtual reality machine, sort of like The Matrix, where you can plug in and have completely happy experiences. When you are in the experience machine, you do not know that you are in the

machine. They erase your memory of having plugged in, and the computer-simulation is so real, you cannot tell it apart from reality. You cannot leave the machine once you are inside, but the scientists guarantee that life INSIDE of the machine will be filled with far more happiness than your real life OUTSIDE of the machine. They give you a choice: Do you (1) Plug into the machine for the rest of your life, or (2) Choose not to plug in, though you know you will be less happy?

What would you do? Nozick's example of the experience machine is meant to be a counter-example to hedonism. He asks, "Would you plug in?" Most people answer "No" to this question. Though it is stipulated that life would be much happier IN the machine, it seems to most of us that a life in the machine just wouldn't be as valuable as a life outside of the machine. A life in the machine seems to be missing something.

If Nozick is right, then we can draw a conclusion about hedonism: For, if happiness were the ONLY thing of value, then the question of whether or not we should plug into the machine would be a no-brainer. Since the experience machine provides total happiness, a life in the machine wouldn't be "missing something" at all. But, the fact that most of us think life inside of the machine WOULD be missing something valuable implies that **happiness is not the only thing that is intrinsically valuable**. Rather, a *good life* requires more than mere happiness. (For further discussion, watch [this video](#).)

### **Argument Against Hedonism**

1. If Hedonism were true, then it would be better to live a very happy life IN the Experience Machine than a slightly less happy life OUTSIDE of the machine.
2. But, life in the Experience Machine would NOT be better.
3. Therefore, Hedonism is false.

Still not convinced? It might be helpful to consider another example:

**A Happy Life of Deception:** Imagine that you are super happy. You have a lot of friends, and loved ones. You have accomplished several important things that you wanted to do (maybe you won an award, or a race, etc., that you really wanted to win). Or so you think. As it turns out, your "friends" insult you behind your back. Your "loved ones" actually hate you, and your partner is secretly cheating on you. The "award" that you won was really a fake, presented to you as a joke. The "race" you won was secretly rigged, also as a joke. And so on. But, you never find out, and die a happy camper.

Which is better? This happy, but deceived life? Or a slightly less happy but GENUINE life? Most probably have the intuition that they would rather have REAL friends and REAL accomplishments, even if they had to give up some happiness in order to have this. But then, again, happiness is not the only thing that makes a life good.

Reply: In response to this objection to hedonism, the utilitarian will typically try to argue that we are actually MISTAKEN in thinking that these other things are intrinsically good (for example, the things on our list above—things like justice, love, knowledge, and beauty). In reality, those things are only *instrumentally* good.

Take “life” for instance: Imagine that you just had life, but you never had any happy experiences. Imagine that day-to-day life was absolutely mundane and nothing exciting ever happened whatsoever. Or, worse, imagine that you were alive, but in a perpetual coma! Would LIFE itself still be valuable in that case? The hedonist says that it is not. Rather, life is **instrumentally** value. One cannot have happy experiences if they are not alive; i.e., life is the MEANS by which we obtain happiness (the only truly valuable thing).

When we say that things like love and life are “valuable” we are getting confused. The explanation for our confusion is that these things are so strongly CORRELATED, or closely ASSOCIATED with getting happiness, that we mistakenly think they are good in and of themselves. Things like love and life bring happiness SO OFTEN that we start to think it is the love or the life ITSELF that is valuable, rather than the happiness alone.

Even “being connected to reality” is only instrumentally good, according to the hedonist. For, one who is disconnected from reality is USUALLY very bad at finding happiness (e.g., if you are on a rooftop and believe you can fly, there is probably not much happiness remaining in your future.) Still, Nozick disagrees, writing, “We want to be importantly connected to reality, not to live in a delusion. We desire this not simply in order to more reliably acquire pleasures or other experiences.” [*What do you think?*]

**6. Objection to Consequentialism:** For consequentialism, “the ends justify the means.” But, there are many cases where the consequence of an action does not seem to be the only thing that matters. Contrary to consequentialism, to most of us it seems as though “the means must justify themselves.” Consider the following stories:

**Peeping Tom:** A young man spies on a woman through her bedroom window and secretly takes pictures of her in the nude. He is never caught, she never finds out, and he uses the pictures exclusively for his own pleasure.

**Organ Harvest:** A doctor is caring for four dying patients, all of them in need of organ transplants (two need kidneys, one a heart, and one a liver, respectively). A healthy patient comes in for a routine check-up. The doctor sedates him, cuts him open, removes his organs, and performs the transplants, saving her four patients. No one ever discovers how she obtained the organs.

The consequentialist concludes that the person in each of these stories has done the MORALLY RIGHT thing! Do you see why? In each case, the individual in the story has brought about consequences that are on balance GOOD overall. Though it is true that all of the cases above describe actions which result in more happiness than harm, the actions nevertheless seem WRONG. It should not matter that I would save the lives of FOUR people by cutting open only ONE person and harvesting their organs. Though there is a net gain of three lives (4 minus 1), the action is still MORALLY WRONG.

If that is true, then clearly, consequences are not the only things that matter, morally. Some things are still *wrong* EVEN IF they produce the best consequences.

Reply: In response, the utilitarian will argue that, in real life, the consequences would very likely NOT be maximized in these cases.

Take the Organ Harvest example: In reality, the doctor would probably get caught. Someone would find out, the doctor would lose her medical license, and she would go to prison. And, if ENOUGH doctors followed in her footsteps killing innocent people, the whole medical system would collapse. For, there would then be a great deal of panic and mistrust between patients and doctors, and sick people would no longer seek treatment for their illnesses, for fear of being murdered. So, in the long run, the utilitarian is NOT prescribing that doctors kill innocent patients for their kidneys. For, in the long run, such a practice would most likely lead to more harm than good.

Similarly, if people in general invaded the privacy of others by spying on them, this would likely do more harm than good. For instance, if Peeping Tom is caught, or the pictures are leaked (both of which seem likely), his victims would experience great psychological distress. [*Is this a good reply? What do you think?*]

**7. Objection to Impartiality:** Recall, impartiality demands that we consider every individual as being of equal importance when making moral decisions. That is, no one should be considered more valuable, or as MATTERING more than anyone else. But, this leaves no room for special relationships or special duties to our loved ones. Consider:

**Burning Building:** The most beloved person in your life (pick someone: your best friend, your spouse, your child, your mother, your father, etc.) is trapped in one room of a burning building. Meanwhile, five strangers are trapped in another room. You only have time to rush in and save the people in ONE of the rooms before the building collapses. Which room do you save?

Impartiality entails that you should **save the five strangers** rather than your loved one. For, five people is greater than one person—and remember that no single person should count for MORE than anyone else. According to impartiality, you must not give

greater weight to the interests of your loved one as compared to those of the strangers. So you ought to save the five strangers. But this is contrary to the intuitions of most. Intuitively, it is at least PERMISSIBLE to save your loved one here. If that is right, then the idea that our moral decisions must be COMPLETELY impartial must be mistaken.

Reply: There is room for personal commitments within utilitarianism. The fact is, people who prioritize the well-being of their loved ones are generally *happier*. Furthermore, *happy people are better at promoting happiness*. In short, a society of people who maintain special personal relationships with others will in general be a happier society than a society of people who do not.

**8. Conclusion:** Utilitarianism has a lot going for it, but is it the correct view? What do you think? Why?

One Final Objection: Utilitarianism in Practice: We might think, "It is impossible to know what all of the consequences of my actions are. Every action I perform probably has far-reaching effects that ripple out through the rest of time. For instance, if I stop at a yellow light, I might cause the person in traffic behind me to arrive 2 minutes later to a location where they are then killed in a freak accident—when otherwise they would have survived had they arrived earlier. So, if I were a utilitarian, I could never know what I ought to do, since I can never know the full extent of any action's consequences."

Reply: Utilitarians commonly suggest that we should have a general set of "rules of thumb" that we can appeal to whenever we do not have the time or the ability to accurately determine the full extent of the consequences of all of our available actions. These rules would be ones that **in general** are known to reliably produce the most amount of happiness. For instance, from past experience we can be pretty sure that things like murder, stealing, lying, etc., are all actions that fail to promote the general welfare. So, even without making any calculations, we can be pretty sure that (in most cases, at least) we should refrain from doing these things. Similarly, in the case above, stopping at a stale yellow light is generally the safest and best thing to do. Having no reason to suspect that doing so will cause the death of the person behind me, I ought to stop, given the information that I have. (Though of course it *will* turn out that I ought to have stepped on the gas. It's just that I had no way of knowing this at the time, and so my action is not blameworthy—i.e., it is undeserving of blame, rebuke, or punishment.)