**Utilitarianism**

1. **What is Utilitarianism?**: This is the theory of morality which says that the right action is always the one that best promotes the total amount of happiness in the world.

Utilitarianism is the combination of the following three views:

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

But what is meant by “intrinsically good” and “instrumentally good”?

a) **Intrinsic goods**: These are things that are desirable for their own sake. As Mill says, they are “desirable as ends.” They are good, in and of themselves.

b) **Instrumental goods**: These are things that are often called “good”, but they are only good insofar as they make it easier for us to obtain intrinsic goods. They are desirable only because they are a means to some truly good end. They are not desirable for their own sake.

For example, happiness is said to be “intrinsically good.” It 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. On the other hand, money is only “instrumentally good.” It is not just plain good to have money and nothing more. No: It is only good 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.

(2) **Consequentialism**: This view states that, when determining the rightness or wrongness of an action, the consequences are all that matter. In other words, 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.

(3) **Impartiality**: This is the view that everyone’s happiness counts equally. No one’s happiness is more important or more valuable than anyone else’s happiness. On this view, one truly should “Love thy neighbor as thyself.”
2. A Mis-Conception About Hedonism: Since “hedonism” is the view that pleasure is all that is valuable, one can easily get a picture of hedonists in a drunken orgy, eating grapes and being fanned by servants, reveling gluttonously in the baser pleasures. But, by “pleasure”, the Utilitarian usually means something much broader than the simple baser pleasures. In his day, John Stuart Mill actually tackled this issue after he was accused of the following:

- The Satisfied Pig: Imagine a pig, wallowing in mud all day. The pig is immensely satisfied, and receives nothing but pleasure from it. Now imagine Socrates, the Greek philosophers, musing all day on an important puzzle of logic. He fails to solve the puzzle that day, and is somewhat dissatisfied with these results.

According to hedonism, it seems that it is better to be the satisfied pig than the dissatisfied Socrates, since pleasure is all that matters. For this reason, opponents accused hedonism of making man no better than an animal. If pleasure is the only thing that is intrinsically good, then we might as well all be pigs, happily wallowing in the mud.

To this, Mill replies that by “pleasure” we do not merely mean the baser pleasures of bodily sensations. He points out that there are different kinds of pleasure, some more valuable than others; for instance, intellectual, emotional, and moral pleasures. The higher pleasures are MUCH more valuable, such that it is actually better to be an intelligent and rational, but slightly dissatisfied individual, than be a completely satisfied pig. He writes, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”

Therefore, this form of hedonism does not reduce to the idea that the only valuable things are the base, sensual pleasures; nor does it imply that our lives are no better than that of swine.

3. Utilitarianism in Practice: Here is how utilitarianism works: When trying to decide what is the right thing to do:

1) Determining the Options: First, we determine what all of our alternatives are.
2) Calculating the Overall Balance of Happiness for Each Option: For each alternative, we add up all of the happiness that would result from that action, and subtract all of the unhappiness that would result from that action.
3) Ensure That the Calculations Include Everyone Affected: When calculating pain and pleasure, we do this impartially; that is, we consider the happiness and unhappiness of everyone that would be affected, in an impartial way (An
“impartial” way is one where no one’s happiness is considered more or less important than anyone else’s).

(4) Identify the Right Action: The right action is the one that results in the greatest amount of net happiness (Net happiness = The sum of all the resulting happiness minus the sum of all the resulting unhappiness).

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

![Pain Measurement Scale](image)

**Let’s try a specific example:** Is marijuana legalization morally right or wrong?

The first thing to do is make a list of all the happiness that would result from legalizing marijuana as well as a list of all of the unhappiness that would result. Let’s do that (these statistics derive from James Rachels):

**Happiness that legalization causes**

1. Pleasure for the drug-users (6% of the present population are currently users).
2. Tax money saved from no longer imprisoning offenders (presently about $8 billion per year).
3. Prevents the unhappiness of offenders being arrested, having a criminal record, etc. (presently about 850,000 arrests per year)
4. Tax revenue generated by government regulation (would be about $6 billion per year).

**Unhappiness that legalization causes**

1. The possibility of addiction or dependence.
2. Mild brain damage in heavy users.
3. Increase in unproductivity of users.
4. Increase in lung related health issues.
5. The anger of those who oppose legalization.

If we do NOT legalize the drug, then there is no change (imagine that we are making the decision in a state where it is presently illegal). So, we only need to calculate whether or not legalization would bring about MORE societal happiness than we presently have. To do this, we simply add up all of the happiness generated in the first list and subtract from that sum all of the unhappiness generated in the second list. Ultimately, the right action will depend on what the net gain of happiness would be (if any).
Objections to Utilitarianism

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

1. 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. The following things are commonly cited as having value in and of themselves as well:

- Knowledge
- Justice
- Beauty
- Love
- Life
- Friendship

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.

Given this fact, 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 we value more than just happiness.
Reply: In response to this objection to hedonism, the utilitarian will 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). The utilitarian argues that, in reality, those things are only instrumentally good.

Take “life” for instance: Imagine that you just had some life, but you never had any happy experiences. Imagine that day-to-day life was absolutely mundane and nothing exciting ever happened whatsoever. Or, further still, imagine that you were alive, but in a perpetual coma! Would LIFE itself still be valuable in that case? The utilitarian argues that it is not. But, life IS instrumentally value. One cannot have happy experiences if they are not alive—so life is the MEANS by which we obtain happiness (the one truly valuable thing in the world).

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 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.

2. 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 three dying patients, all of them in need of organ transplants (they need a kidney, a heart, and 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 three 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? Because 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 does not matter that I could save the lives of THREE people by cutting open only ONE person and harvesting their organs—Though the net gain is that two lives are saved (3 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 just plain wrong, regardless of whether or not they produce the best consequences.

Reply: In response, the utilitarian will argue that—while it IS true that, in the cases as they are described above, the sheriff must lynch the innocent man, and the doctor must cut open the innocent patient, etc.—in real life it just isn’t like that.

Take the organ harvest example: In reality, the doctor would get caught. Someone would find out, the doctor would lose her medical license, and she would go to jail. 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. 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 actually lead to more harm than good.

Similarly, if people in general did not keep their promises, trust between people—with all of the benefits that this comes with—would begin to break down. And similarly for convicting and punishing innocent people, and for invading the privacy of others by peeping or spying on them. [Is this a good reply? What do you think?]

3. Objection to Impartiality: Impartiality stated that we ought to consider everyone 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. An objection to impartiality is that it leaves no room for special relationships or special duties to our loved ones. Consider the following scenario:

- **Burning Building:** The most beloved person in your life (pick someone: 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 demands that you should save the five strangers rather than your loved one. This is because five people is much greater than one person—and remember that no single person should count for MORE than anyone else. According to impartiality, you cannot count your loved one as being any more valuable than anyone else. So you ought to save the five strangers. But this is contrary to what almost everyone thinks is true. Therefore, 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 that fulfill their special obligations to their loved ones are happier. Furthermore, happy people are better at promoting happiness. 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.

4. Objection to Utilitarianism in Practice: This objection does not target any of the three TENETS of Utilitarianism, but rather, it targets the possibility of putting the theory INTO PRACTICE. The idea here is that actually being a utilitarian would be impossible in practice. Utilitarianism demands that people perform complex calculations, adding up all of the happiness and unhappiness that may result from every alternative. But, in reality, this would be an impossible task, and perhaps even one that does not maximize happiness. Consider the following example:

- Baby Stroller: From a distance, you see a stroller with an infant in it rolling out onto a busy street. A truck is headed directly toward it, and the driver does not seem to notice the stroller. Before deciding what to do, you stop to consider all of your alternatives: Do nothing, call the police, try to get the mother’s attention, rush to the stroller to try to move it out of the way, etc. You pull out a clipboard, a pencil, and a calculator, and begin calculating all of the happiness and unhappiness that would result from each of these alternatives in order to determine which one would have the best result. While you are performing your calculations, the truck hits the stroller and it is completely destroyed.

Obviously, calculating the best alternative in this scenario was itself the worst alternative. In an attempt to be a utilitarian, you have actually brought about the worst result. But a good moral theory should be one that never guides one to bring about the worst possible result. It seems, then, that utilitarianism is a bad moral theory—or at least, one that could never be put into perfect practice.

Reply: We can get around this sort of problem easily enough. 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 perform all of the necessary calculations. 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 doings these things. Similarly, in the case above, it does not take a pen and a calculator to recognize that pulling the stroller out of the street is the best course of action.