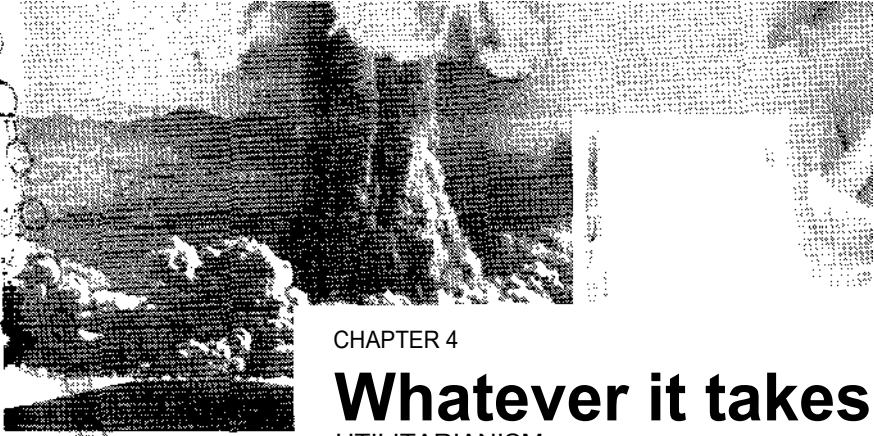


UTILITARIA



CHAPTER 4

Whatever it takes

UTILITARIANISM

INTRODUCTION

SCENARIO ONE

You are hiking through a South American jungle, and you look forward to cooling off in a nearby village. But as you emerge from the jungle you see twenty Indians lined up in the village square. Pedro, a revolutionary, is ranting and waving his pistol while his mercenaries stand around nursing AK47s. You are spotted and dragged over to Pedro, who explains that he was about to kill this random twenty to show that the revolution cannot be stopped. But he will greet your timely arrival with a special act of mercy. If you kill just one of the Indians, the other nineteen will go free.

The greatest happiness
of the greatest number
is the foundation of
morals and legislation.

SCENARIO TWO

You have just completed your PhD in chemistry. It is the only thing you're any good at, and jobs are scarce. You're married and a baby is on the way, your savings are running out, and your families can't really help. An older friend calls to tell you about a job. 'What is it?' you ask. It turns out that you will be a researcher in a chemical and biological weapons factory. Your friend doesn't like the place much, but he does have influence with the management. He admits that part of the reason he wants you there is because you might help limit what they do. Someone else who will advance this work greatly is very likely to get the job if you don't apply.

What will you do?

It always seems a bit unfair, when trying to think about right and wrong, to start with outrageous scenarios like these. After all, life is not usually like this. Life is mostly humdrum, and even when it's not, we can usually work out how to avoid such dilemmas (like having other job skills, or not backpacking somewhere during a revolution). These scenarios are designed to hassle those who live in a way that seems pretty decent at first. This way of living is called 'utilitarianism', a long word to express the idea: "**11 do whatever it takes to make more happiness in the world.**" In a discussion between two famous philosophers about this idea, those scenarios were invented by the guy who is against it.²

Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.

J **JOHN STUART MILL**
UTILITARIANISM,
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People who live as utilitarians have several thoughts guiding them.

1. They want to be thoughtful about the future. They don't want to act first and think later.
2. They want to leave the world, or their patch of it, a little better than the way they found it.

3. Their measure for 'a better world' is whether everyone is happier or not. Even though 'happier' can be hard to pin down, utilitarians think hard about the different things that make people happy. (It is called 'utilitarianism' because it is about maximising 'utility'—an old and odd word for 'usefulness', or 'desirability', or 'people's satisfied preferences'. I'll generally stick with 'happiness' here.)
4. They want right and wrong to be a bit simpler. They don't want to get bogged down in lists of rules. Even the Ten Commandments should only be followed if they increase happiness, and when they don't, they shouldn't be followed.
5. They don't want to have too much discussion about whether some preferences are better than others (such as opera vs. mud-wrestling, or homosexuality vs. heterosexuality). A better world will simply maximise more preferences for more people.
6. They will consider their own happiness, but other peoples' happiness counts greatly. They say they are willing to sacrifice their own happiness if they have to.
7. Some utilitarians do not even limit their thinking to human 'people'. For them, any sentient being is a 'person', and they seek for a happier world where the satisfied preferences of humans and animals are maximised.

Of course, it is easy to find people who call themselves 'utilitarian', but who are actually just selfish. They do whatever it takes to make *themselves* happy. They are 'egoists': the only person who matters is their precious self. True utilitarians do actually care about others. What the egoist and the utilitarian share, though, is that they are both *consequentialists*. They decide whether their actions are right or wrong *solely* by the results of each action.

So the utilitarian *only* asks, 'will what I am going to do make more happiness in the world?' (while the egoist simply asks whether it will work for him or herself). In the examples above,

- a utilitarian hiker in South America might say, 'to kill just one, and quickly, will make just a few grief-stricken people, plus one dead person whose happiness is reduced to zero, plus some torment for me. Compare this to nineteen people who are glad to be alive, and their families and friends, and it becomes right to pull the trigger'.
- a utilitarian chemist might say, 'it's right to take this job. Someone else might take it and work hard at it, but perhaps I can go slow or do a little sabotage or influence the management. Therefore I will possibly reduce some suffering in the world; my pay cheque will also make my family and me happier; so on balance this messed-up world will be slightly better if I do that job'.

There are lots of kinds of utilitarian, each of whom has a different way to describe happiness and a different way of calculating what will make more of it.³ Therefore not all utilitarians would give those answers. However, they all share one thing in common: that no action is just right or wrong in itself. It is not *always* right to keep a promise, or to tell the truth, or not to steal. There is nothing *intrinsically* wrong with making and using a bioweapon. There is nothing *intrinsically* wrong with killing a stranger. The test is in whether there will be more or less happiness as a result.

Of course, there's not much happiness for the people being killed, which is why it would *normally* be very wrong to kill the stranger or use bioweapons. The reduction of their happiness to zero, and the suffering of the people who love them, is what usually makes murder wrong. But in the same debate between the two philosophers, this example also appears:

- It is 1938 and you are backpacking through Bavaria, Germany, somewhere near Berchtesgaden. (The famous 'Eagle's Nest' retreat is nearby, although you know nothing about the retreat or its important owner.) Passing a stream you notice a middle-aged man thrashing and gasping for help. You dive in and drag him to safety. As he thanks you profusely, you notice his odd little black moustache. Only after war breaks out do you realise that you have saved Adolf Hitler.

Did you do the right thing? The utilitarian philosopher who posed this example thinks it very obvious that you did the *wrong* thing—although of course he will still praise you for it, since usually, saving people makes the world a better place.⁴ But perhaps you can see how utilitarians measure right and wrong by *effects*, not by the actions themselves, and not by using any rules. (Some utilitarians do have a place for rules but I'll leave them out of it.)

Universal happiness
keeps the wheels
steadily turning;
truth and beauty
can't.

ALDOUS HUXLEY

Utilitarianism is a television scriptwriter's dream. In the police drama *The Shield*, lead detective Vic Mackey (played by Michael Chiklis) kills his colleague, who threatens to expose Vic's corruption; but Vic believes his 'corruption' is for a greater good—to minimise suffering through his own particular style of policing. In *24* Season Two, Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) threatens a terrorist's family with death, forcing the terrorist to reveal the whereabouts of a nuclear bomb.

Perhaps you begin to glimpse some of the features of utilitarianism. Reality is pretty much 'what you see is what you get'. Utilitarians just observe what seems to make people happy, and are not very interested in going much 'deeper'. They dislike 'metaphysics'—the various theories about invisible forces that structure our world. **Human beings**, then, are primarily a bunch of desires that need meeting. (For some utilitarians, even a *Matrix*-

type world where everyone is plugged in and kept artificially happy is a serious option.) What happens at our death is not really a relevant consideration: since we cannot see or measure that. Utilitarians would not attempt to include any afterlife happiness or unhappiness in their calculations. In all this, utilitarians are strongly 'empiricist': they think that knowledge mainly comes through observation, not through grand theories or divine revelation. Hence right and wrong can only be determined by seeing what works in people's lives, and by matching our actions to increase whatever works.

There are examples of utilitarian thinking among the ancient Greeks, but it is more interesting to notice the modern history of this style of thinking.⁵ (By 'modern' I mean the last few-hundred years.) It began to take off in mid-eighteenth century England and Scotland. Scottish philosopher Frances Hutcheson's idea of *impartial* maximisation, where society should aim to improve conditions for every member, was brand-new in these class-based societies. It wasn't long before 'happiness' caught on as the criteria by which to decide what was worth maximising.

Interestingly, one of the first serious utilitarians was a well-known Christian, William Paley (writing in 1785).⁶ He loved the way God had made the world for our enjoyment. It followed that God's rules must be for our happiness, and that any rule worth having, and any act worth doing, must be explicable in terms of whether it contributes to our enjoyment of life. He also thought that only some things truly made people happy: relationships, passionate engagement in tasks that matter, good habits, and good health. Everything else that has the *appearance* of bringing happiness (such as sensual pleasure, the absence of pain, or greatness of rank) was actually a fake. He also thought that our prospect of happiness (or

Utilitarianism is a way of facing moral issues without God.

**GENE EDWARD
VEITH, J.N.R.**

not) after we die was relevant to calculating the rightness of actions.

Jeremy Bentham wrote in response to Paley in 1789, beginning with these famous sentences. '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.'" Here was the first major change to Paley's approach: that there was no point listing the kinds of happiness that were 'fake' versus 'real' (and he would later write that it just doesn't matter if one enjoys poetry or the simple game of push-pin).⁸

Secondly, Bentham thought that since we are not able to measure happiness (or unhappiness) after we die, it is irrelevant in calculating what is right. Thirdly, you will notice that for Bentham humanity finds guidance in 'nature', not in God.

Bentham laid the foundations for utilitarianism as we know it: right behaviour consists in doing *whatever it takes* to increase happiness—of *all forms*; impartially—*across all members* of a society; and secularly—*without reference* to God.

The next major utilitarian, **John Stuart Mill**, wrote in 1859 that Bentham had given civil law a whole new basis. For Mill, English law had been based on feudalism: 'a tribe of rude soldiers, holding a conquered people in subjection, and dividing its spoils among themselves. Advancing civilisation had, however, converted this armed encampment of barbarous warriors... into an industrious, commercial, rich, and free people.'⁹ Here we glimpse what the utilitarians thought they were doing. They wanted a system of ethics that secured social order and harmony and which was understandable for merchants and other key players in an emerging new commercial order. Utilitarianism is a perfect ethic for a capitalist and consumerist society. Instead of asking 'is it right?' people can simply ask 'will it

work?' and make a calculation, sometimes quickly, about whether the world will be better as a result.

Australian philosopher **Peter Singer** is a high-profile contemporary utilitarian. His *preference utilitarianism* consists in the maximisation of preferences or choices for the greatest number of all rational, choosing persons (including higher animals), and in the minimisation of pain for all conscious life forms. All acts and policies should achieve these ends. Among Singer's conclusions are:°

- Contraception, abortion and infanticide are permitted on the basis that it is always good to reduce overpopulation. (But we should not inflict pain upon sentient beings, or limit choice making for rational persons; therefore we must not kill just anyone to reduce overpopulation.)

Animals should not suffer for something so frivolous as cosmetic testing.

We should kill sentient beings who are painfully, terminally ill with no prospect of recovery (euthanasia), because their suffering outweighs any pleasure that life might give them.

- Actions causing pain or destruction of sentient beings (whales, for example) are wrong, but similar actions upon non-sentient beings (new-born anencephalic [no-brain] humans, or human embryos) are not wrong.
- The killing of disabled babies is justified in view of their likely suffering outweighing whatever preferences they might be likely to fulfil.

The appeal of preference utilitarianism lies in (i) its appearance of scientific objectivity; (ii) its supposed simplicity for measuring the good of social policies; (iii) the way it highlights our responsibility for the consequences of our actions; (iv) its promise to arbitrate across pluralism, and without recourse

to religion, for an ethic agreeable to all; and (v) its straightforward practicality—it produces great sound-bites." This kind of utilitarianism is the dominant ethic guiding law making in the modern West, and especially in Australia (although there is enough 'human rights' thinking in the mix to mean that we are not purely utilitarian).

SINGER LOGIC

Peter Singer is controversial and extreme in his articulation of a Utilitarian vision for life. His directness becomes helpful in understanding the implications of this mode of thinking. Its basis is easily identified:

When we reject belief in God we must give up the idea that life on this planet has some preordained meaning', he writes. 'Life as a whole has no meaning. Life began, as the best available theories tell us, in a chance combination of gases; it then evolved through random mutation and natural selection. All this just happened; it did not happen to any overall purpose. Now that it has resulted in the existence of beings who prefer some states of affairs to others, however, it may be possible for particular lives to be meaningful. In this sense some atheists can find meaning in life.' 12

Meaning comes from what Singer refers to as a preferred state of being. It is all about maximising happiness, which sounds fine but carries some alarming implications. Moving far from the notion of the sacredness of human life, Singer believes if a baby is disabled it makes perfect sense to replace it with one who is not, thus increasing the chances of overall happiness. He writes, when the death of the disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy- life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed'.

Much of this stems from Singer's understanding of personhood coming from consciousness, rather than, a human nature ; membership of the human species. To him it makes perfect sense to make judgments of the worthiness of human life according to his utilitarian framework. This is a far cry from a Christian understanding of each life being 'inviolable, unrepeatable, and irreplaceable'.

Westerners, then, are deeply utilitarian in their outlook, exceptionally so compared to many other people in the world. Indeed if you are reading this as a Westerner, you may have been thinking 'so what? Isn't utilitarianism obvious?'

But a close examination of utilitarianism reveals some of its shortcomings. It is too simplistic, and does not make sense of everything. Utilitarianism doesn't help us with some good things that we want to protect. We will have more to say about some of those failures in what follows.

A NECESSARY EVIL? ATOMIC UTILITARIANISM

On 6 August 1945 the US airforce B-**29 bomber, the Enola Gay**, took off from an airbase on the island of **Tinian in the West Pacific** headed for the Japanese city of Hiroshima. **On board was** 'little boy', a bomb containing 60kg of uranium. At 8.15 **the bomb was** dropped over the target. It exploded **about 600 metres above** the city **and** instantly killed around **70,000 people**. **The death toll** from this attack is **estimated** to be over **100,000, many died** from radiation poisoning. This action on behalf of the US government was repeated three days later, when the city of Nagasaki felt the fury of the nuclear bomb code named 'fat man'. Again the death toll was horrific - reaching around 80,000 **people**. **As in the case of** Hiroshima, almost all those killed were civilians.

The decision to use nuclear weapons to bomb Japan is a striking example of utilitarian thinking. It also encapsulates something of the complexity of making moral **judgments** and ethical decisions by way of a utilitarian mindset. The destruction **of Hiroshima** and Nagasaki has been defended on the grounds of an attempt to minimise the loss of life that would have resulted **from an invasion** of Japan. The Japanese appeared determined to fight to the bitter end, even when defeat was inevitable.

The bombs were **used** to demonstrate the futility of dragging the war on, and to save the lives of allied soldiers, as well as avoiding more Japanese deaths. An end to the war was certainly **achieved**.

costly invasion of Japan was avoided. Yet questions linger over **the wisdom and morality of the decision. The disastrous impact on innocent civilians is inestimable. Not to mention the dark shadow the threat of nuclear war has cast** over all our lives ever since.

In a speech given at Oxford University in 1956. Elizabeth Anscombe protested the awarding of an honorary degree to President Truman, 'the man who pressed the button', of the bomb. Her main argument was that to kill innocent people as a means to an end is always murder.¹⁴ .She didn't get much support on the day, yet, she highlights an interesting aspect of the debate. Was the utilitarian approach right, or did the cost of the action outweigh the benefits?

CONTACT AND DEPARTURE FROM CHRISTIANITY

It is worth pausing to notice something obvious about utilitarianism that is easily missed. Bentham may have stripped God out of Paley's utilitarianism, but he retained two important elements: (i) that it is good for every human to be considered impartially; and (ii) the way 'nature' reveals that it is good for humanity to be happy. These claims are utilitarian bedrock. Almost everyone in modern western nations would agree. They seem obvious to everyone, and do not seem to need any religious belief to make them true.

But—how do we *know* these claims are true? In fact, we do not. It could just as easily be the case that humanity evolved for no reason, and has no purpose, and will die painfully and pointlessly. It could just as easily be true that the strong should rule over the weak and do what they want with them. 'Nature' could just as easily be read in this way, and many social systems have proceeded on that basis. From the ancient world one need only think of the Roman Empire and its belief, implemented with brutal efficiency, that 'might equals right'. In the

'What should we do collectively?' is the much more the characteristically utilitarian question than is 'Now should I live personally?'¹⁵

ROBERT E. GOODIN

modern context Adolf Hitler's Nazi party and its understanding of the destiny of the Aryan race to rule the world, allowed them to justify genocide and outrageous abuses of human rights.

In contrast, English utilitarianism grew out of English Christianity. Eighteenth century Englishmen thought and wrote as if they agreed with Christianity's claim that God's creation was good and enjoyable, and that every person was a precious creature made in God's image. Mill claimed that 'civilisation' had produced an industrious, commercial, rich, and free people'; but what exactly is civilisation? Certainly Christianity was a potent force in making English society 'civil' in this way.

Secular thinkers today generally have little interest in this observation, and think that we can assume the ethical results to be true even if the Christian origins are now obsolete. But Christians disagree. They would argue that without God's good news that his creation is good and that humans are precious to him, human societies *will* drift back into powerful and abusive hierarchies like the ancient ones.

Many objections to utilitarianism have been raised.¹⁶ Here are a few, which can also be shown to have Christian roots.

1. Utilitarianism can be unjust.

Utilitarians don't really want to be like this, yet they often find themselves musing over whether Jack Bauer, or Detective Vic Mackay, or Pedro's unwilling triggerman, were right. When killing one innocent person would save the lives of many, they must usually answer that the killing would be right. It is often quite hard for a utilitarian to uphold human rights' or 'justice' (although 'preference utilitarianism' tries hard to avoid this difficulty).

2. Utilitarianism can be irresponsible.

Since utilitarians focus upon the future, the

goodness or badness of the here and now, and of previous utilitarian future-calculations, can go un-assessed. 'Don't cry over spilt milk', the utilitarian has to say. 'There's no point blaming anyone; let's just make the best of a bad job.' In this way utilitarians never have to pause and consider if their last utilitarian experiment was a failure, or if their theory is flawed.

3. Utilitarianism can miscalculate.

Perhaps humans are just not very good at calculating the future. Our imagination fails to notice bad outcomes all the time. Short-term consequences can't be predicted with certainty and long-term consequences can't be predicted at all. Perhaps calculating happiness is not easy, either. Peter Singer thinks the severely disabled suffer so much that it is justified to kill them at birth. But many disabled people disagree, and report they are glad to be alive despite their difficulties. In their case, Singer's calculation about them would simply have been wrong.

4. Utilitarianism can become shortsighted.

Leaders can descend into giving a nation what it wants (e.g. lower taxes), and not what it needs (e.g. sustainable energy sources). Governments that are focused upon people's wants leave no place for a leader to suggest that those wants are misguided. Such a society will aim for economic growth at all costs, with few asking if difficult issues are being ignored (such as an over-reliance upon fossil-fuels, or growing unease about having and raising children).

5. Utilitarians can lose their 'integrity'.

If a utilitarian is to be consistent, he or she can't always be honest. A utilitarian living among devout religious believers might decide that the greatest good is advanced by using religious arguments to get the best result. The utilitarian doesn't really believe those arguments, yet uses them as if she or he does. Also, the utilitarian

who cares for rare flowers, or art, or heritage buildings might have to put aside this concern if these preferences are better maximised by some other means. Either way, if you think that 'integrity' is important—where our concerns agree with our actions—then that integrity will corrode.

6. Utilitarians can be self-deceiving.

Utilitarian thinking all too easily slides into personal egoistic consequentialism. Not only can we stop thinking about the many and start thinking only of ourselves, we can also fail to notice the way our desires interfere with our calculations. For constantly calculating future happiness usually means we never get there: we're always onto the next calculation—which is not so different from what the Bible calls 'greed' or a lack of 'contentment'. We get tangled up in our desires: most business fraud, for example, is committed by people who have the desire, the opportunity, and a way of convincing themselves that what they are doing is not theft. The desire for money has distorted the calculation, yet the fraudulent person still thinks he or she is doing something very 'reasonable'.

7. Consequentialism destroys trust.

Although 'utilitarianism' tries to make a safe society for all, its consequentialist underpinnings are bad news for relationships. Consequentialism, you'll remember, is where an action is only right because of its results; therefore if lying, or promise breaking, or betrayal, or neglect gets me a better result then I'll do those things. But good relationships seem to need truth, faithfulness, loyalty, and effort, and our work and play and friendships rely on trust that grows from these things. Consequentialism makes fractured, difficult and unsafe societies.

8. Consequentialism can be cruel and empty.

True story: a woman was in great difficulty in her marriage. Obviously very sad, she walked around her workplace asking people what she should do. They told her, whatever it takes to be happy, honey'. But she needed to know where happiness comes from. Freedom from her husband might give it, but there would also be loneliness, pain and anger. Perhaps the pain of confrontation, forgiveness and repentance might help – but her co-workers were never going to explore that, because 'happiness' was their only cure-all. Indeed their advice was probably a code for 'get out of the relationship', and a lazy refusal to consider the woman's alternatives.

I haven't argued where the above objections might be found in the Bible; but consequentialism is always an evil there. When Caiaphas says of Jesus that 'it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish' (John 11: 49-50), we are witnessing a pure travesty of justice—even though ironically, Jesus' death *does* save his people from being destroyed by God's wrath.

But biblical authors were interested in the future. Every ethical decision has to have an eye on the future to a certain extent, but there are clear limits and consequentialism is rejected outright. These limits include such things as:

- Christian fellowships (that is, churches, which Paul calls 'God's temple') must not be damaged (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)
- certain lifestyles are always wrong (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 18)
- sneaky methods of evangelism are unacceptable (2 Corinthians 4:2, 6:3)
- worship of false gods is never an option (1 Corinthians 10:14; 2 Corinthians 6:16)
- truth must never be violated (2 Corinthians 13:8)

These limits are based upon what God has revealed to humanity about ourselves. We are made not only for happiness, but also for faithful and loving relationships, firstly with God and then with each other. These relationships bring responsibilities that can be expressed as rules, which we don't always like, because so often we just want to fulfil our own desires. Our desires each have a proper place, but God trains his people when to say 'yes' and 'no' to them. All this means that we can grow into people who have various patterns of action and feeling, such as those Galatians 5:22 describes as 'the fruit of the spirit', 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control'.

There *is* a problem when a good goal justifies questionable actions in working towards it. Christians are not immune to consequentialist mistakes. But they should know that consequentialism is often just what the Bible calls 'temptation', and that saying 'no' to it *drives them to imagine truly new and alternative* courses of action that make for a better future, *and* keep trust and sanity along the way.

The Christian chemist, refusing the bioweapons job, might be motivated to find a group of sympathisers to support her and her baby while she uses her skill to write and lobby against the bioweapons industry. The Christian hiker, knowing that he cannot shoot the Indian, will remonstrate with Pedro so passionately that Pedro may be swayed. The Christian will know that Pedro is lying when he says 'you give me no alternative', and that only Pedro will be accountable to God for whomever Pedro kills. The Christian will also know that if a group of SAS commandos were to appear, it would be justice, not consequentialism, that made it permissible for them to stop Pedro. And if no commandos showed up, the Christian hiker might even have the capacity, a bit like many martyrs before him, to turn the gun on himself, if that's what it took to stop Pedro. The

revolution would probably be forgotten—and guess what would be remembered in its place?

RESPONSE QUESTION



1. What would be a good slogan to sum up the underlying beliefs of utilitarianism?
2. Of the eight objections to utilitarianism (pages 96-98), which do you find the most compelling?

DISCUSSION



- A. What are some manifestations of utilitarian thinking that you have seen?
- B. On what issues is utilitarianism the most attractive option?
- C. How much do you agree that 'there is a problem when a good goal justifies questionable actions' (page 100)?