

## Act utilitarianism: objections from calculation<sup>1</sup>

In its simplest form, act utilitarianism is defined by three claims.

1. What is right? Actions are morally right or wrong depending on their consequences and nothing else. An act is right if it maximises what is good. This is ‘act consequentialism’.
2. What is good? The only thing that is good is happiness, understood as pleasure and the absence of pain. This is ‘hedonism’.
3. Who counts? No one’s happiness counts more than anyone else’s. This is a commitment to equality.

In this handout, we will look at two objections to act utilitarianism. For further objections, see the handouts ‘Happiness, pleasure and preferences’, ‘Utilitarianism, fairness and rights’ and ‘Utilitarianism, partiality and integrity’.

### PROBLEMS WITH CALCULATION

Act utilitarianism seems to offer a clear and straightforward way of discovering what is right and wrong. We need to consider how much happiness an action will cause. But is it possible to work out the consequences of an action for human happiness? How can we know or work out the consequences of an action, to discover whether it maximises happiness or not? Surely this will be too difficult and too time-consuming for us to do. Bentham’s felicific calculus says we should consider for each possible pleasure produced by each possible action is more intense, will last longer, is more certain to occur, will happen sooner rather than later, or will produce in turn many other pleasures and few pains, than the pleasures produced by other actions. We also need to take into account how many people will be affected. All this is, in practice, mind-boggling, and we just can’t get the relevant information (how intense each affected person’s pleasure or pain will be, how long it will last, what other pleasures or pains it might cause in turn, etc.).

Preference utilitarianism might try to claim an advantage here. It is easier to know whether someone’s preference has been satisfied than how much pleasure someone experiences. But this is very little improvement if we still need to compare the strength of different people’s preferences, whether satisfying one preference leads to further preferences being satisfied, and so on.

However, the objection misrepresents what utilitarians say. Bentham does not say that an action is right if it actually maximises happiness. He says it is right according to ‘the tendency which it appears to have’ to maximise happiness. We

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 225-9

don't need to be able to work out the consequences precisely. An action is right if we can reasonably expect that it will maximise happiness. He also says that the felicific calculus need not be 'strictly pursued' before each decision or moral judgement. It just needs to be 'kept in view'.

This still means we must be able to work things out roughly. Mill thought this was still too demanding. Happiness is 'much too complex and indefinite' a standard to apply directly to actions. But we don't need to try, he claims, because over time, people have automatically, through trial and error, worked out which actions tend to produce happiness. This is what our inherited moral rules actually are: 'tell the truth', 'don't steal', and 'keep your promises' are embodiments of the wisdom of humanity that lying, theft and false promising tend to lead to unhappiness.

Mill calls these moral rules 'secondary principles'. It is only in cases of conflict between secondary principles (e.g. if by telling the truth you break your promise) that we need to apply the greatest happiness principle directly to an action. We shouldn't attempt to calculate happiness directly unless we have such a conflict. Only in cases of conflict will there be genuine exceptions to these rules.

Of course, our inherited morality still makes mistakes in what it thinks will or won't contribute to general happiness. So we can improve on the rules that we have. But saying this is quite different from saying that we have to consider each action from scratch, as though we had no prior moral knowledge.

### **WHICH BEINGS' HAPPINESS SHOULD WE INCLUDE?**

A number of these issues about calculation, and whether Mill's responses really solve the problem, come into sharp relief when we consider which beings which should include in calculating the happiness or unhappiness caused by an action.

Bentham was aware that his identification of happiness as the only good had some radical implications. In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, He argued that the question about who or what to consider when looking at the consequences of our actions is not 'Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?'

Utilitarianism says that happiness is good, not just that the happiness of humans is good. If happiness is good, then it is good no matter what creature feels it. There is nothing in the theory that gives us a reason to privilege human happiness over the happiness of non-human animals. So it seems that the logic of utilitarianism requires us to take as much account of beings that are not human as of human beings. The third condition of act utilitarianism - that the happiness of each matters equally - does not stop at the boundary between human and non-human.

This line of thought has been more recently developed by Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation*. We do not think that it is right to treat women worse than men just because they are women (this is sexism), nor to treat one race worse than another (this is racism). Likewise, it is wrong to treat animals as unequal just because they are not human. This is 'speciesism'.

We can object that with women and men, and different races, there is no difference in those important capacities - reason, the use of language, the depth of our emotional experience, our self-awareness, our ability to distinguish right and wrong - that make a being a person. But there is a difference between human beings and animals with all of these.

Singer responds that these differences are not relevant when it comes to the important capacity that human beings and animals share, namely sentience, the basic consciousness needed to experience pleasure and pain. For a utilitarian, an act (or rule) is wrong if it produces more suffering than an alternative. Who is suffering is irrelevant. When it comes to suffering, animals should be treated as equal to people.

If the happiness of every being that can feel pleasure or pain, or can have preferences that are satisfied or not, makes a difference to whether an action is morally right or not, the problem of calculation is intensified. If it is difficult to compare the happiness of different people, it is much more difficult to compare the happiness of a person with that of, say, a pig or a bird. But this will be relevant if we ask whether we should eat meat or whether we should destroy wild habitats to make new farms to grow crops for people.

Furthermore, in response to Mill, we can argue that our inherited morality isn't much help here. Many cultures do not take much moral notice of animals beyond prohibiting deliberately inflicting pain on them for no good reason. Apart from that, they allow treating them simply as tools to be used to make human lives happier, e.g. as food, as clothing, as beasts of burden, as objects of experiment, and so on. So we cannot use our existing moral rules, since they do not take account of the happiness of creatures other than humans, and yet we cannot calculate the effects of our actions on the happiness of non-human animals with any degree of accuracy.

Singer can respond that a new customary morality is needed. We will need to work out, together and as best we can, drawing on whatever evidence we can, the tendencies our actions have to affect the happiness of other creatures, and then create secondary principles concerning how we treat animals. It may not be perfect, but it is the best we can do.