John Stuart Mill and Utilitarianism
Utilitarianism

• Definition =
• Utilitarianism is an example of consequentialism, a type of ethical theory according to which what matters are the consequences of an action, not its intent.
• Therefore whether an action is good or not depends on its outcome or result, not the means to that end nor the motivation for it
Some precursors

• The Chinese philosopher **Mozi** (490-403 BCE): He notes that customs can’t justify themselves. We need some standard to judge them by. That standard is, does the custom lead to more benefit than harm?

• The Greek philosopher **Epicurus** (341-270 BCE): “Pleasure is the goal that nature has ordained for us; it is also the standard by which we judge everything good”
English background to John Stuart Mill’s Utilitarianism

- Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) – an important predecessor and influence; he was also a friend of Mill’s father, so close that Mill asked him to be his son’s godfather
- Bentham said that pleasure was the only objective good, and pain the only evil
- Said that right actions result in “good or pleasure;” wrong actions result in pain or absence of pleasure
- Good consequences are those that result in the greatest amount of pleasure (happiness) for the “party whose interest is in question.”
- Hedonic calculus = pleasure and pain are quantifiable. You can measure them according to: intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, propinquity (i.e., nearness), fecundity, purity, and extent (number of people)
John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

- Brilliant thinker and writer
- Like Bentham, a social reformer
- Had a very unique education (he was essentially home-schooled by his father, who started Mill on learning Greek by age 3 and Latin by age 8; other subjects like mathematics and logic followed; although Mill was from a large family, he had very few opportunities to socialize with other children, which probably contributed to his having a mental breakdown at age 20)
- Mill eventually met Harriet Taylor, a like-minded soul; after 20 years of platonic friendship, they married in 1850
- Taylor had a major influence on her husband’s support for women’s rights, including the right to vote, and contributed to several of his writings
Utilitarian principle: Act to promote the greatest good (happiness) for the greatest number

• Utilitarianism is “the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, utility, or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong if they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”

• For Mill, happiness is the basic measure of utility, not pleasure

• Also noteworthy is that Mill is concerned with increasing the amount of general happiness, not with increasing any one person’s happiness
Questions of happiness

How is happiness to be defined?

1. If by the individual, that leads to moral relativism or subjectivism
2. By some objective standard? This implies that there is another standard that serves as the basis for utilitarianism
Mill questions Bentham’s claim that the pleasures are all equal.

- Mill tries to refine Bentham’s theory
- Mill says that all pleasures are not equal; some are noble, others base
- For example, intellectual pleasures like enjoying poetry are superior to lower kinds of experience, those associated with the body such as food or sleep
- In assessing pleasures, we should take into account quality as well as quantity
- Some pleasures are more in keeping with what is good for us
- Mill: “Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied”
Rule utilitarianism vs. act utilitarianism

- Mill is generally considered to be an advocate of what later came to be known as rule utilitarianism, as opposed to act utilitarianism.

- Rule utilitarians look at the consequences of having everyone follow a particular rule and calculate the overall utility of accepting or rejecting the rule; they want to establish rules that lead to greater pleasure or happiness in the long run; they think that following at least some rules is more practical than having to calculate the utility of an act every time it is contemplated or performed; an example of one such rule: one should always tell the truth.

- Act utilitarians look at the consequences of each individual act and calculate the utility each time the particular act is performed; the reason for this can be seen in the following example: if on one day lying will lead to more happiness, one should lie, whereas if on another day, telling the truth leads to more happiness, one should tell the truth.
Rule utilitarianism: Three levels of rules
(according to Louis Pojman and James Fieser, writing about utilitarians in *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*)

• First order: Rules of thumb which are always to be followed (since they generally maximize utility) unless one rule of thumb comes into conflict with another rule (For example, “Do not steal,” “Do not lie,” or “Doctors should never intentionally harm a patient”)

• Second order: A set of rules for resolving conflicts between rules of thumb (e.g., “it is more important to avoid causing serious harm than to tell the truth”)

• Third-order: When no rule applies, simply do what your best judgment tells you will lead to the greatest utility or pleasure or happiness (Rule utilitarianism gives way here to act utilitarianism)
Some problems with utilitarianism

1. It promotes a kind of cost-benefit analysis to morality (but do such issues as slavery, the sale of body organs, or ecological ethics get treated justly by this approach?)

2. How can it be consistently applied? Are there not sometimes exceptions? Is it not difficult to measure or quantify pleasure and happiness?

3. It is concerned only with ends; it does not attach much if any moral significance to the means used to achieve the end. So as long as a course of action produces the greatest possible benefit, utilitarianism does not care whether the benefits are produced by lies, torture, or other kinds of dishonest behavior

4. We don’t always know the consequences of our actions; it is hard to predict the future

5. It discriminates against minorities; only the majority seems to matter (see the greatest happiness principle)

6. It is relativistic since it seems to endorse different rules or modes of behavior for different societies
A test case for utilitarianism: the use of atomic weapons at the end of WWII

- Many innocent civilians died as the result of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
- Was a greater good served by the tens of thousands who died?
- Or is killing the innocent always wrong, no matter what the consequences?
- What would a utilitarian say?
- What would you say?
Another test case: the Ticking bomb

• A terrorist is captured, together with information showing his involvement in a plot to blow up downtown New York City or Washington D.C. with a nuclear bomb set to detonate in a few hours. The only way to find the location of the bomb to stop hundreds of thousands if not millions of people from dying may be to torture the terrorist. Would it be wrong to do so?

• For you, is “Do not torture” an absolute rule with no exceptions? That is what the United Nations Convention against Torture says. Do you agree?