

1. What is Utilitarianism?

- Role of principle of utility: sole axiom of morality, the “test of right and wrong.”
- Statement of Principle of Utility: In any circumstances, that action ought to be done (is right) and that institution ought to obtain (is right) which, of all the alternatives available, produces the greatest net balance of happiness over unhappiness, when we sum happiness/unhappiness over all sentient beings, from now into the future.
- The principle of utility is aggregative: greater benefits for some always outweigh the smaller burdens on others.

2. Why endorse utilitarianism?

- It provides an analytically tractable method for resolving moral questions.
- It expresses an idea of equality: happiness of all affected parties counts equally.
- It joins consequentialist idea that rightness of conduct depends on goodness of overall consequences, with idea that happiness is sole ultimate good.

3. What About Rights and Fairness?

- Conventional political morality treats ideas of rights and fairness as fundamental, not as deriving importance from their contribution to the general welfare.
- Utilitarians treat rights as derivative, not fundamental elements of political morality. They argue for rights by showing that the protection of the right promotes overall happiness.

4. How Does Bentham Interpret the Principle of Utility?

- Consequentialism: Conduct is right just in case it has best consequences.
- Hedonism: Pleasure (pain) is the only intrinsically good (bad) thing: only thing good (bad) in and of itself, and not good (bad) because of its consequences.
- Pleasures: “interesting perceptions,” mental states we find it desirable to have.

- Egoistic hedonism: people act to produce the greatest pleasure for themselves (psychological hedonism) and what brings pleasure are (generally speaking) goods that the agent has (egoistic hedonism).
- Quantitative Hedonism: Value of a pleasure is determined by its quantity, and the quantity of pleasure is determined by its intensity and duration.

5. How Does a Utilitarian Defend Personal Liberty?

- Focus on moral liberty: Is it permissible to impose criminal punishment on person whose conduct conflicts with community morality, even if the conduct does not harm others?
- Three reasons for supporting enforcement: preserving shared values required for social stability; democracy gives us equal weight in deciding on social environment; good community should improve the lives of members.
- Three reasons for opposing enforcement: moral skepticism; pragmatic concerns for social peace; autonomy requires that people rely on their own values in deciding how to live.
- Bentham offers a cost/benefit argument for moral liberty: when conduct is immoral, but not harmful to others, the benefits of punishment are small. So the punishment is "unprofitable."

6. How Does a Utilitarian Defend Equality?

- In the abstract, the implications of utilitarianism for economic distribution are unclear.
- Bentham argued that principle of utility supports greater economic equality, because of *declining marginal utility*: as person gets wealthier, the increment to pleasure produced by an increment to wealth shrinks.
- Qualifications: if labor effort is dependent on expected reward, then limits on equality may be needed to ensure incentives.

7. Is the Benthamite Case for Moral Liberty Compelling?

- Bentham's criticism of morality legislation is shaky given pleasures of malevolence. Indeed, all liberties have a highly uncertain status.
- One line of criticism rejects the unrestricted aggregation of benefits and burdens. Justice requires more attention to how burdens fall on people, not just to aggregate welfare.
- Some pleasures are qualitatively better than others, not simply quantitatively greater: discount the pleasures of malevolence because they are not genuinely good pleasures (Mill).