

Though it is never so simply stated, Utilitarianism, originally formulated by Jeremy Bentham, is based on an extremely mathematical style of decision-making. Given numerical values for the happiness or pleasure—negative values for unhappiness or pain—that each involved party would be expected to experience as a result of a given action, summing these values gives a score for that action. Deciding amongst many possible actions is a simple matter: the principle of utility dictates that one ought to pick the action with the highest score—the one that results in the greatest utility.<sup>1</sup> John Stewart Mill, in *Utilitarianism*, stresses that absolute objectivity must be maintained in grading potential actions; one must “love one’s neighbors as oneself,” giving no greater consideration to any one affected party than any other<sup>2</sup> Mill modifies Bentham’s system for ranking pleasures and pains, laying down a comparative process that relies on the preferences of informed parties to identify the superior of two pleasures.<sup>3</sup> Though these ideals are straightforward, an examination of Mill’s and Bentham’s systems for determining right action reveals a variety of flaws that prohibit their implementation in reality.

Given the ability to assign scores to actions, the principle of utility appears to bring about a positive state of affairs in the world. Utilitarian actions have a general tendency to increase the total happiness of those they affect, and presumably to increase the happiness, in the long run, of each and every individual in question. With universal adoption of the principle of utility, then, all individuals in the world would be affected by decisions made according to the principle, and therefore it is plausible to expect that everyone’s happiness would generally increase. This is the general idea of utilitarianism: its goal is to increase everyone’s happiness, and its means to this end

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, in *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Peter Markie, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 335.

<sup>2</sup> John Stewart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Peter Markie, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 375.

<sup>3</sup> Mill, p. 348.

is to make decisions at every turn that tend to increase the happiness of all parties in question.

While there are some fundamental arguments against utilitarianism even in this state, left alone as an idealized system, any attempts to bring it closer to application also reveal significant problems.

Even with Mill's refinements of Bentham's techniques for measuring happiness, the ability to assign the scores described above is by no means trivial.

Two fundamental problems with utilitarianism that go hand in hand are that its considerations are too extensive and too flexible. Bentham laid down, as a fundamental quality of utilitarianism, the process of summing the positive and negative consequences of an action, both immediate and future, for all individuals affected by a potential decision. Mill's modifications to the evaluation of pleasures only affect the beginning values in this process, not the process on the whole. No matter how the individual pleasures and pains of each party are evaluated, Bentham's technique dictates that for each individual, account must be taken of every pleasure and every pain resulting directly from an act, as well as all future pleasures and pains.<sup>4</sup> Though it is difficult enough to predict what pleasures or pains may result directly from an act, almost all certainty breaks down when considering what future pleasures might arise. The number of variables to be considered and the immense multiplicity of unpredictable external influences make it impossible to create any reliable projection of the long-term consequences of an action. There are two solutions to this problem, both of which are unsatisfactory.

Firstly, all but the most certain and direct of outcomes may be thrown away, removed from consideration in our happiness calculations. In this case, utilitarianism relies on what is known in mathematics as a "local optimization" technique; decisions are directed toward maximizing short-term gains in happiness, in the logical but ultimately unreliable hope that their aggregate long-term effect will be increased happiness overall. An analogous strategy, with analogous drawbacks, can be found implemented by amateur chess players: each move is focused on best protecting the

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<sup>4</sup> Bentham, p. 335.

player's king, preserving the player's own pieces, or removing the opponent's pieces from the board. Operating under this strategy, the player may soon find himself outsmarted, placed in a situation he did not foresee. This same danger is present in real-life decision-making, and while the rules of chess are formal enough that strategies may be developed to look ahead and consider the possible outcomes of a variety of moves many turns in the future, the unpredictable nature of real life makes an analogue to this technique impossible.

The other possible resolution of the problem of uncertain future outcomes is to carry on attempting to determine what the most likely chain of events following a decision will be. Opting for this technique, it is simply a matter of argumentation to decide which pleasures or pains may be judged to follow from an act. As John Arthur points out, however, humans have a tendency to rationalize decisions that ought to be made objectively but are in fact bent toward their own interests.<sup>5</sup> Given the near-infinite uncertainty of any given consequence occurring as a result of an act, an equally strong utilitarian argument can be made for any chosen consequence as any other. There is, then, no structure in place in utilitarianism to keep an individual from arguing for interpretations of possible consequences that would lead to a decision in her own interests. Though utilitarianism's most basic precepts dictate that objectivity must be maintained, the principle does not provide any objective option to resolve this difficulty.

On a different level, great difficulties exist in Mill's reformation of utilitarianism, which attempted to introduce a more qualitative perspective on the value of various pleasures to Bentham's system, because of a lack of specificity. For Mill, evaluating pleasures and pains is a comparative process. To pick out the superior of two possible pleasures, the worse of two pains, or whether a pain and a pleasure are of matching but opposite value, one needs simply to ask a number of individuals who have experienced both.<sup>6</sup> Assuming the reliability of this process, it

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<sup>5</sup> John Arthur, *Famine Relief and the Ideal Moral Code*, in *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Peter Markie, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 821.

<sup>6</sup> Mill, p. 348.

would be possible to compile a full listing of values for all possible pleasures and pains, which could then be incorporated into Bentham's summation process. However, even the most basic examination of this technique's application in real situations reveals its shortcomings. Some pains are so powerful that they defy reliable comparison to other pains; for example, death, torture, dismemberment, or estrangement from loved ones. Another, slightly more complex problem is that the positive and negative sides of the scale on which pleasures and pains are placed are difficult to align against each other.

When comparing a pleasure to a pain, the question asked of knowledgeable parties is, "would you suffer this pain in order to achieve this pleasure?" Mill assumes that the responses to his evaluating questions will always be very near consensus.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, a mass reply of "yes" to the above question leads to the conclusion that the pleasure is of an equal or greater absolute value than the pain; "no" implies the pleasure is of lesser absolute value. If the values of pleasures and pains are assumed to be inherent, as they are in the utilitarian construct, then one must expect that a cutoff point exists, at which the consensus switches from "yes" to "no" as the value of the pleasures being compared to a fixed pain are lowered. This is clearly not the case, however: even taken completely out of context, there will be much variability in opinion as to whether closely-matched pleasures and pains are worth experiencing together. What this means is that the negative side of the scale may be warped or jumbled: pains may be ranked out of order, or may be considered more or less alike than they actually are.

As has already been engaged above, utilitarianism, as a highly mathematical moral system, is bound to the laws of mathematics. Mill provides only a system for comparing two pleasures, but the decisions utilitarianism intends to ultimately make are amongst many actions, each of which has an incredible variety of resultant pleasures and pains. To make this decision, the values of the pleasures and pains must be summed. It is assured (the limitation mentioned in the previous

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<sup>7</sup> Mill, p. 348.

paragraph notwithstanding) that an act resulting in a “-15” pain and a “+15” pleasure balances out to have an overall neutral impact, but involving any more than one pleasure or pain invalidates this process. The reason for this is quite simple: assigning values to objects based on comparative ranking does not guarantee that their values are arithmetically meaningful. If a “+15” pleasure is given its value for being preferable to the established “+14” pleasure but less preferable than the “+16” one, and other pleasures and pains are evaluated similarly, then there is no way to be certain that two acts resulting, respectively, in two “+15” pleasures and both a “+14” and a “+16” are equally good, nor that they would both be neutral acts if they also resulted in a “-30” pain. In short, Millian utilitarianism’s numerical treatment of pleasures and pains is fallacious.

Furthermore, Bentham formed utilitarianism in order to give morality a basis in reason, because he saw that all other systems before “consist[ed] all of them in so many contrivances for avoiding the obligation of appealing to any external standard.”<sup>8</sup> Mill’s system of evaluation, however, relies simply on opinion, and therefore abandons morality’s definition to the tyranny of the majority. If Mill is to be believed, however, that the formative questions of preference between pleasures would yield consensus responses, then this is not a problem in the evaluation of pleasures. Utilitarianism also defaults to majority rule in general, though: if an act benefits a great number of people, their pleasures can outweigh the significant pains of a few. There is the possibility in a utilitarian system that some people, by sheer bad luck, could be left behind and consistently end up on the short end of moral decisions. Since all decisions are made without context, there is no way to safeguard against this scenario, although most people would agree that consistently subjecting a minority to pains, even non-permanent or short-lived ones, for the sake of pleasures for the majority amounts to mistreatment.

Additionally, even Mill’s comparative technique for evaluating pleasures has a problem: it introduces bias and casts decisions of limited applicability as universal moral law. In

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<sup>8</sup> Bentham, p.331.

*Utilitarianism*, Mill asserts that by virtue of their greater intellect, humans are capable not only of the lower pleasures available to animals, but of higher pleasures as well. He proceeds to defend the universal superiority of the pleasures of the intellect and in doing so introduces his pleasure-evaluation system.<sup>9</sup> However, as Mill points out, the only individuals sufficiently familiar with both levels of pleasures, such that their preferences would be considered in deciding the relative value of a high versus a low pleasure, are nearly guaranteed to be philosophers and intellectuals. It is not necessarily true that those comfortable with base pleasures would indeed prefer higher pleasures if they had experience with them. Those who have pursued and continue to pursue higher pleasures will always prefer them because they have found success in their pursuit; if they preferred base pleasures, they would choose not to be philosophers and intellectuals. It is possible, even, that there are some people—belonging to the class of “fools,” as Mill describes them—who have experienced higher pleasures but preferred the lower, and therefore chose to turn away from them. For these and any “fools” who possess similar but undiscovered tastes, the judgment handed down by the “superior beings” who Mill wishes to consult exclusively is unfair. However, the uninformed tastes of the masses are also not to be trusted, so there is no resolution available, and the whole of the utilitarian system built upon these decisions becomes untenable.

For disparate reasons, then, even apart from any attack on the correctness of the principle of utility itself, it can be observed that it is impossible to implement utilitarianism. While its ideas hang together well, the practical process of solidifying the system to truly answer questions of right and wrong cannot be resolved. Mill’s utilitarianism, especially, incorporates the same subjectivity, bias, and inequality that it was meant to eliminate. Ultimately, utilitarianism’s loose theoretical definition is its fatal flaw in even the most minimal application to the real world.

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<sup>9</sup> Mill, p. 346-7.