John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1873)

The Most Common Ethical System in Use Today

The history of ethics is as long as education itself, and it should be clear that theories of ethics have arisen when two conditions are present: the cultural need for a new way of thinking through ethics (metaethics) and a particularly talented teacher to speak and write it out.

Utilitarian ethics is the most common form in use today. In the context of the Modern Era, by which we mean since the start of the Industrial Age in the 1840s, utilitarian ends-based thinking has thrived because two needs have been met by it: first, ends-based thinking is common throughout the culture as people have sought to improve and perfect what is produced by their effort; second, the speed of life has made single-criterion solutions attractive toward rapid and effective problem solving.

Aristotle had taught that all things have a purpose. It is good to ask about the proper purpose of ethical work; indeed, of ethics themselves. With utilitarian ends-based ethics, the purpose is to produce good outcomes. More directly, utilitarian ethics aims to produce one specific outcome: happiness. As happiness is the single good to be produced, all the many things that are associated with happy outcomes are merely the means to deliver said happiness.

Why do we work the many activities of our lives and occupations? While a case can be made that some things are valuable on their own merit, our activities are generally valued for what they produce. The most basic outcome is happiness for ourselves as individuals, with further value attached to the happiness of our whole community. A proper word for this, not common in daily discussion, is "approbation."

Before beginning, let's visit with John Stuart Mill.



Play

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**Please click the link above for the audio version of the Mill lecture.**

**Read along with the**[**transcript  (Links to an external site.)Links to an external site.**](https://lms.courselearn.net/lms/CourseExport/files/4edafdde-810a-4ea4-a0ea-1498463ded37/documents--Mill_audio.pdf)

Outcomes & Consequences

It's truly amazing how few people ever figure out the connection between their decisions and the consequences of those decisions. Consequences are outcomes, yet many people blithely move through life wondering why life is difficult. Life is full of consequences of unrecognized decisions, and many are quite troublesome.

There is a logical link: If the purpose of ethics is decisions, then better ethics will yield better decisions and better consequences. Quality ethics aimed at decisions will generally produce better consequences; therefore, a vision of desirable consequences (and less undesirable ones) will drive better decisions.

Looking at decisions and consequences in a sequential manner, decisions are made in time before their consequences appear. In simple form, this is why the Latin term a posteriori is used, post being the word meaning "after." A simple test for spotting an ends-based way is to consider, "What would happen if we actually choose this?" That is a very sobering question, but it displays the model of thinking. Beyond the decision in time is an opportunity to evaluate the decision making and to learn lessons from it in preparation for the next utilitarian decision.

Of the three primary schools of ethics given in the Week 1 reading, **Utilitarianism**is distinct in its focus as the most common and developed ends-based ethical system. This is not a process of trial and error as much as a process of improvement through success and failure of decision making.

Utilitarian Theory & Practice

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) is the name associated with the developed theory of Utilitarianism through his book by that title of 1861. The theory developed from the basis of his godfather Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and his writing "Principles of Morals and Legislation."

**Jeremy Bentham Writing to Both Mill and Us About the Principle of Utility**

"By the **Principle of Utility**is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question; or what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness."

Expressing that thought in ethical terms means to make choices that produce the best consequences overall for everybody impacted by the choice. That points to the desire for good choices and the connection to the community rather than to the individual.

Our first course objective connects ethics to other disciplines; in this case, that as we desire happiness, we should also make the decisions that produce happiness. The **Greatest Happiness Principle**seeks an existence as rich as possible in enjoyable things and exempt, so far as possible, from painful things. Pure pleasure and elimination of pain are not possible, but a utilitarian system will seek the greatest balance of the pleasurable things (like happiness) over the painful things of life. It aims at a kind of optimization, though neither Bentham or Mill used that word.

**Mill's precise definition of Utilitarianism**

To express this concisely for ethics, J. S. Mill expresses Utilitarian ethics as

**"… 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 as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."**

**Happiness is an outcome, the desired consequence of all actions.**

Two corollary ideas follow: One is that all the arrangements of society should connect the interests of individuals with the interests of the whole community. Another is that education should teach all persons to attach their own happiness to the happiness of their whole community.

Utilitarianism uses the happiness produced as the sole and single criterion for all ethics. This ethics is not an a priori and rational form of ethics but a very concrete form of ethics in which only the happiness produced will be valued totally apart from all intentions and motives involved in making decisions.

This also means that Utilitarian is a totally this-world ethics system aimed at present time realities and apart from other-worldly considerations, including those of religion.

Objections to Utilitarianism

An earlier lecture spoke of the value of considering objections to ethical theories as a constructive way to understand theories better. John Stuart Mill generated plenty of objections!

One objection was the precision of happiness as the only thing of value to be produced. He anticipated that money and fame would be offered as valuable by those voicing objections. In both the money and fame objections, Mill spoke of their value as expressed in the happiness they produced, not valued in and of themselves.

A second objection was that Utilitarian was a "godless" doctrine unconventional to the rest of ethics history. That is true; it aims to produce happiness in the present time and for an earthly life and has no religious component. Mill pushed back to assert that a benevolent god would clearly want his people to enjoy happiness.

Utilitarianism was also seen as unconventional and even subversive as it opposed the legal forms of justice that punished criminals rather than seeking to rehabilitate them for the happiness of society.

Mill was accused of creating a system that honored no absolute rules. That is a true objection, because consequentialist ends-based ethics operate in an opposite way to deontological rules-based ethics.

Mill also anticipated that his doctrine would generate an objection of being "worthy of swine" in the sense that pleasure is desired by swine happily wallowing in the mud as much as by humans. Contrary to that idea, Mill spoke of human pleasure in both quantity and quality with the quality pleasure being the higher ones of intellectual pleasure that is strictly human. And what human would give up humanity and our human mental processes to wallow in mud?

Majority Will

As a single criterion for making decisions, Utilitarianism is simple and direct. It calls for decisions in expectation of the consequences they will produce and then works backward from desired consequences to prescribe decisions that will deliver them. It calls on decision-makers to give great significance to happiness and unhappiness above all other considerations, and it declares the equality of the happiness of all people while also tying individual happiness to community happiness.

If the happiness of all people is valued equally, then no individuals are to be privileged or discriminated against. This can also lead to a kind of tyranny through majority opinion against minorities.

Connecting to notions of Locke's Social Contract and constitutional governing through majority rule among equal people, it also follows that constitutional government is imperfect and that majority rule is no guarantee that quality rule will be delivered and cruel rule be avoided.

Comparing with Aristotle

Outside of the literature is a special concept that only consequentialist ends-based ethics display. Ends-based theories anticipate outcomes and give opportunities to measure the quality of decisions after they are made by the happiness that was actually delivered. This, then, gives a secondary opportunity to learn from the evaluation of decisions and improve decision making for the future and improvement of subsequent outcomes. A kind of feedback loop is created for a process of continuous improvement.

We are invited to ask a question that poses the ultimate utilitarian test: "What will happen if we actually choose this action instead of another one?" What, indeed! Such a question makes no sense in deontological ethics, like those of Kant, because the single criterion for deontological ethics is that principle and intentions drive the decisions completely outside of concern for outcomes and consequences.

Compared with Aristotle's Ethics of Virtue, Utilitarian ethics have a similar practical aspect of developing habits and skill over time and through repetition and practice--different from but not unlike Aristotle's virtues.

Care-based Dilemmas



Utilitarian ethics clearly connect individuals with their larger community, but at the individual level, they are not completely unlike the care-based ethics presented in the Three Primary Schools model. To ask what outcomes and consequences will occur is similar to making care-based decisions in the thought of what decision-makers would want to happen to them in the same situation.

Care-based ethics enjoys a kind of reciprocity between people in which decision-makers can imagine themselves as the object of the decision as well as the subject of the decision-making process. At the same time, and perceiving themselves in dual roles in the dilemma, this process of ethics can become very subjective for decision-makers who can confuse what is good for others with what they perceive as good for themselves.

People who must communicate public decisions encounter a special difficulty. Public officials and their spokespersons desire public acceptance of their decisions and public approval of their administrations. The public in general is very mixed in its opinions, unsystematic in its understanding if issues and ethics, dependent on media commentators for analysis, and generally responsive in personal and subjective ways--mixing concerns and simultaneous reactions to what is communicated. Communicating to the public audience is most effective when directed toward them at several levels simultaneously.

One recent president ended many public speeches about policies and actions by trying to appeal to everybody in their manners of responding by saying, "We should do this for (reasons X, Y, and Z); besides, it is the right thing to do."

Summary Points

**Two Versions of Single Criterion Ethics**

Reviewing and comparing deontological and consequentialist ethics by their single criterion dynamic:

**Deontological rules-based ethics**, with Immanuel Kant and the Categorical Imperative as the primary example, drive decisions through the single criterion of the rule or principle to be applied; therefore, consequences do not matter morally.

**Consequential ends-base ethics**, with John Stuart Mill and Utilitarianism as the primary example, drive decisions through the amount of happiness to be produced as a consequence; therefore, the rules and principles do not matter morally.

The Greatest Happiness Principle underlying Utilitarianism seeks happiness as the only desired outcome and other good results as the means for delivering happiness. The context for that happiness is that of the whole community, not individuals.

Care-based ethics can be confusing, because the one making decisions is invited to perceive or imagine himself or herself as the one for whom a decision is to be made and then making the decision they would want made. Unlike Utilitarianism, the outcome for the case would be a decision about the other person, but there is also a pleasing sense of approbation for having made a personally satisfying and subjective decision of happiness as a successful decision-maker.