

## Utilitarian Theories of Value

- I. *Introduction*: As a form of consequentialism, utilitarianism holds that the moral permissibility of actions depends on the goodness of their consequences—that an action is right if, and only if, it produces more value than any alternative action. What distinguishes utilitarianism from other forms of consequentialism is that the evaluation of outcomes is *individualistic* and *impartial*.
  - A. *Individualism*: An individualistic theory holds that the overall goodness (value) value of an outcome is a function of the goodness (value) for individuals. There is no value except individual value.
  - B. *Impartiality*: An impersonal theory holds that the goodness of *every* individual counts equally in determining the overall value of an outcome (unlike egoism or group chauvinism).
- II. *Introduction to Some Popular Individualist Theories of Value*
  - A. *Hedonism*: Hedonism is the theory that pleasure, and only pleasure, is intrinsically good and that pain, and only pain, is intrinsically bad. In common speech, ‘hedonism’ is sometimes confined to an egoistic form of the theory. This is not true in philosophical discussions. The hedonist may be an egoist, a group chauvinist or a utilitarian. Jeremy Bentham is, perhaps, the clearest example of a hedonistic utilitarian.
  - B. *Eudaimonism*: Eudaimonism holds that what is intrinsically good for individuals is happiness, where this is understood as not merely pleasure. Sometimes ‘well-being’ or ‘flourishing’ is used instead of ‘happiness’ to make this clear. If we understand ‘a happy life’ to mean something like ‘a good life for an individual to live’, then we can say that the eudaimonist holds that happiness, and only happiness, is intrinsically good and that unhappiness, and only unhappiness, is intrinsically bad. John Stuart Mill is a clear example of a eudaimonistic utilitarian.
- III. *Hedonistic Theories of Value*
  - A. *The Evaluation of Pleasures*
    1. Pleasures are all qualitatively the same. Considered only in themselves (apart from their causes and effects) they differ only in *intensity* and *duration*. Of course, there are many different sources of pleasure. As an analogy (and *only* an analogy), you can think of their being a bell in the head that can be rung by many different bell-ropes, but there is only one bell. Different ringings of the bell differ in themselves only in how loud they are and how long they go on.
- IV. *Mill’s Eudaimonistic Theories of Value*
  - A. *It is sometimes claimed that Mill’s eudaimonism is just a terminological variant of Bentham’s hedonism.*
    1. *Support* for this comes from passages like these:
      - a. Mill says, apparently with no disagreement that “. . . every writer from Epicurus to Bentham who maintained the theory of utility meant by it, not something to be contradistinguished from pleasure, but pleasure itself, together with exemption from pain, and , instead of opposing the useful to the agreeable or the ornamental, have always declared that the useful means these . . .” (from *Utilitarianism* in *Selected Writings of John Stuart Mill*, p. 248).
      - b. Latter Mill says, “By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain,; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure” (*SW*, p. 249).
    2. *Criticism of this support*: Both passages are quoted out of context.
      - a. Mill continues the first quote as follows: “. . . have always declared that the useful means these, *among other things*” (*SW*, p. 248, emphasis added).
      - b. The second passage is followed by this caveat: “To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory much more requires to be said, in particular, what things it included in the ideas of pain and pleasure and to what extent this is left an open question”(*SW*, p. 249).

But, this makes no sense to a Benthamite hedonist. Pleasure is a mental sensation. The idea of it including certain determinate things and leaving the open the possibility of other things makes no sense. Mill is clearly using 'pleasure' in a very different sense here.

B. *Mill's specific denial of hedonism*

1. In responding to the charge that happiness is impossible Mill says this: "If by happiness is meant a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement, it is evident enough that this is impossible. . . The happiness which [eudaimonists] meant was not a life of rapture, but moments of such in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing. A life thus composed, to those who have been fortunate enough to obtain it, has always appeared worthy of the name of happiness" (*SW* p. 254-5).

B. *The Elements of Happiness*

1. *Sense of Dignity*: ". . . [A] sense of dignity, which all human beings possess in one form or another, . . . is so *essential a part of the happiness of those in whom it is strong* that nothing which conflicts with it could be, otherwise than momentarily, an object of desire to them" (*SW*, p. 251).
2. *Security*: ". . . [The thirst for retaliation derives] its intensity as well as its moral justification from the extraordinarily important and impressive *kind of utility* which is concerned. The interest involved is that of security, to everyone's feelings the most vital of interests. All other earthly benefits are needed by one person, not needed by another; and many of them can, if necessary, be cheerfully foregone or replaced by something else; but security no human being can possibly do without; on it we depend for all our immunity from evil and for the whole value of all and every good beyond the passing moment, since nothing but the gratification of the instant could be of any worth to us if we could be deprived of everything the next instant by whoever was momentarily stronger than ourselves" (*SW*, p. 294, emphasis added).
3. *Individuality*: "If it were felt that the free development of individuality is one of the leading *essentials of well-being*—that it is not only a coordinate element with all that is designated by the terms civilization, instruction, education, culture, but is itself a necessary part and condition of all those things—there would be no danger that liberty should be undervalued, and the adjustment of the boundaries between it and social control would present no extraordinary difficulty. But the evil is that individual spontaneity is hardly recognized by the common modes of thinking as having any *intrinsic worth* or deserving regard on its own account" (from *On Liberty* in *SW*, p. 172-3, emphasis added).
4. *The Harmonious Development of Oneself*: Mill quotes Wilhem von Humbolt favorably, "the end of man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal or immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole"; that, therefore, the object 'toward which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially those who design to influence their fellow men must ever keep their eyes, is the individuality of power and development'" (from *On Liberty* in *SW*, p. 173).
5. *(Possibly) Concern for the Well-Being of Others*: "When people who are tolerably fortunate in their outward lot do not find in life sufficient enjoyment to make it valuable to them, the cause generally is caring for nobody but themselves. To those who have neither public nor private affections, the excitements of life are much curtailed, and in any case dwindle in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be terminated by death; while those who leave after them objects of personal affection, and especially those who have also cultivated a fellow-feeling with the collective interests of mankind, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigor of youth and health" (*SW*, p. 255).
6. All of these "elements of happiness" are, in Mill's terminology, *pleasures*. He is saying what is included in the concept of pleasure and to what extent this is left open.

C. *Qualitative Distinctions between Pleasures*1. *Ambiguity of 'qualitative difference':*

- a. 'Having different qualitative properties': Different colors are qualitatively different in this sense; similarly, ice differs from (liquid) water *qualitatively*.
- b. 'Differing in value': Sometimes when we say that something is qualitatively different than another we mean that one is more valuable—the quality is higher.

2. Mill believes that pleasures can be qualitatively different from one another in *both* senses.

- a. Because pleasures are not understood as a single sensation with many possible causes, but more like we understand it when we say, "It was a pleasure reminiscing with old friends last night", Mill holds that pleasures are qualitatively different in the first sense. Even considered apart from their causes and effects and even setting aside the quantitative differences of intensity and duration, they have different properties. They are qualitatively different in this sense.
- b. *Higher/Lower Pleasures*: Mill also believes that there are "higher" and "lower" pleasures. Higher pleasures for humans are those that involve one's uniquely human abilities; lower pleasures do not. He believes that the higher pleasures are better and are essential to human happiness. The lower are not essential to human happiness.
  - i. In a justly famous passage, Mill claims "Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs, they would not resign what they possess more than he for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him. . . *It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.* And if the fool or the pig are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. the other party to the comparison knows both sides" (*SW*, p. 251-2, emphasis added).

V. *Comparison of Hedonism and Eudaimonism:*A. *Criticisms of Hedonism:*

- 1. *Not all pleasures are qualitatively the same.* Even considering pleasure only as a sensation, it seems phenomenologically false that all pleasures are qualitatively similar. The pleasure of watching your child take her first step or hearing her say, "I love you, Daddy", is, I think, *qualitatively* different from the pleasure of eating a hot fudge sundae with peppermint ice cream which, in turn, is *qualitatively* different from the pleasure of defeating your nemesis at racquetball.
- 2. *Pleasure is not the only thing that is intrinsically good.* (Some things other than pleasure are intrinsically good.)
  - a. Nozick's Pleasure Machine
- 3. *Not all pleasures are intrinsically good:* the pleasure that the rapist gets from rape or the sadist gets from torture of an innocent and nonconsenting victim is not, the critic charges, good.
  - a. *Reply:* The hedonist responds that it is not good *all things considered* because it is not good that people derive pleasures from these activities. Hence, because these pleasures lead to greater pain, they are *on balance* bad. But this is because of their *extrinsic* properties. Considering only their *intrinsic* properties—considering them only as sensations of pleasure—they are good. This is to say, they are *intrinsically* good.

- i. *Response:* If the pleasure of the rapist in raping or the sadist in torturing were even only intrinsically good, it would *tend* to make his action less seriously wrong—it would *count against* the pain and suffering of his victim. But this is not so.

- (a) The Case of the Sadistic Voyeurs

B. *Evaluation of eudaimonism on the above criteria:*

1. Eudaimonism is not committed to the view that all pleasures are qualitatively the same nor that all experiences that are a part of human happiness are qualitatively the same.
2. Eudaimonism is not committed to the view that the *sensation of pleasure* is the only thing that is intrinsically good. It will, therefore, escape the objection based on Nozick's Pleasure Machine. It is, of course, committed to the view that happiness is the only thing that is intrinsically good. If individualism is correct (if overall value is a function of the value for individuals), this may be quite plausible depending on what all is included in the notion of happiness. Mill has a rich conception of happiness. Such experiences as accomplishing a goal or seeing your child develop as a person can be, for Mill, intrinsically valuable, and not merely valuable in producing some separate experience, happiness. Such things can be a *part* of happiness.
  - a. Mill says: "The ingredients of happiness are very various, and each of them is desirable in itself, and not merely when considered as swelling an aggregate. The principle of utility does not mean that any given pleasure, as music for instance, or any given exemption from pain, as for example health, are to be looked upon as means to a collective something termed happiness and to be desired on that account. *They are desired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are a part of the end*" (SW, p. 277, emphasis added).
3. It is not immediately clear that eudaimonism avoids the problem of counting all pleasures as intrinsically good. Mill, after all, seems to hold that happiness includes the concept of pleasure (among other things). Other eudaimonists could, however, hold that happiness includes only certain sorts of pleasures—excluding, for example, sadistic pleasures. Even Mill can say the following: the pleasure of the sadist is good only insofar as it is considered merely as the sensation of pleasure; if we consider the activity itself in all its aspects, we are free to evaluate it as *intrinsically* bad (and not just instrumentally bad).

C. *Problems with Eudaimonism:*

1. *The Problem of Pluralism:* One of the main problems faced by eudaimonism (other than defending the individualist assumption) is ensuring that the diverse elements of happiness can allow us to offer a coherent evaluation of the goodness of outcomes. If there are several diverse sorts of things that are intrinsically valuable, how do we compare these values when they come in conflict with one another.