How can you tell if someone has “done the right thing” or not? And how do you yourself decide what to do in various difficult situations? To make such judgments, we human beings generally look to our society’s ethical theories for guidance. In the modern period (beginning with Descartes in the 17th century), two main kinds of ethical theories have arisen—those which judge the moral worth of an action by its consequences (consequentialist theories), and those which judge the worth of an action by the intentions of the person committing the action (nonconsequentialist, or deontological theories).

The most prominent consequentialist theory has been that of Utilitarianism, which was introduced in England in the early nineteenth century by Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and Mill’s son John Stuart Mill. Utilitarianism says that the morality of an action should be judged by the nature of its results. For example, suppose that a woman dies while trying to rescue three children from a burning building; the children die as well. Utilitarianism would say that the woman’s action was immoral, because it resulted in the deaths of four people. The woman’s intention—to help others—would be irrelevant. By contrast, nonconsequentialist theories would say that her action was moral simply because she did what most universal codes of “right” behavior would dictate—she tried to help others.

Consequentialist theories like Utilitarianism therefore define right in terms of the degree to which an action promotes something good. Other moral theories define good in terms of how much an action follows the dictates of morally right behavior, regardless of consequences. Thus, we may say that consequentialist theories define “right” in terms of “good,” while nonconsequentialist theories define “good” in terms of “right.”
HEDONISM OR ALTRUISM?

Although clearly there are profound differences between consequentialist and nonconsequentialist moral theories, there is also much variation among individual consequentialist theories. Specifically, they each offer different viewpoints on what kind of good—protecting the environment, serving God, etc.—our actions should try to achieve. Utilitarianism defines a “good” act as one that generates human pleasure or happiness. According to Utilitarianism, an action is right if it promotes more human well-being than any other action would. On its surface, Utilitarianism may thus seem hedonistic. However, by stressing the greatest pleasure for the greatest number, Utilitarianism also has an altruistic element.

Unlike many ethical systems that seem to have little practical relevance, Utilitarianism exerted great influence on liberal social reforms in England and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Jeremy Bentham’s book, Principles of Morals and Legislation, became a guide for progressive British legislators in the nineteenth-century reformist movement. It is easy to see how reformers could use the “greatest happiness” principle to promote social legislation that would benefit large numbers of people at the expense of a privileged few. In a popular democracy, legislation is determined, indirectly, by the will of the majority. The “best” policies, therefore, are those which benefit the majority.

Although different people want many different things in life, the Utilitarians believed that the only reason people wanted anything was that it would bring them pleasure and happiness. Thus Utilitarianism’s popularity has stemmed from two great strengths: it makes use of an obvious and universal principle, that people like pleasure and hate pain, and it seems to provide a useful “cost/benefit” decision-making tool for social legislators in modern democracies.

CRITICS OF UTILITARIANISM

Like most moral (and indeed most philosophical) theories, Utilitarianism faced many criticisms and manifested various changes in the attempt to answer its critics. First, some observers complained that, by its emphasis on the quantity of pleasure, Utilitarianism reduced human beings to the level of animals. Specifically, because enjoying a good meal might be more pleasurable than reading a book of philosophy, Utilitarians would deem the dining experience more “moral” than the book reading. John Stuart Mill sought to answer this criticism by differentiating “quality” from sheer “quantity” of
pleasure. Thus he would have argued that reading a philosophy book might be a “higher quality” pleasure than enjoying a good meal, and therefore better (though it would generate less quantity of pleasure than a good meal would). As he put it, “Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.”

Another criticism pointed to the fact that Utilitarianism seemed to endorse or at least allow a kind of expediency of the moment. For example, Utilitarians would argue that if hanging an innocent person for a particular crime actually discouraged crimes of that sort, then the hanging would be a moral act. Worse, Utilitarians would believe that the enslavement of a people would be moral if it produced a net increase in the overall pleasure of society as a whole. To answer this accusation of expediency, Utilitarians sought to distinguish “act utilitarianism” from “rule utilitarianism.” Act utilitarianism judged actions by their immediate consequences—and so would be subject to the charge of expediency. Rule utilitarianism judged the moral rule behind an action, rather than the action itself, according to the “greatest happiness” principle. It then judged the action by how much it conformed to the moral rule. In this way, the Utilitarians hoped to make rule utilitarianism immune to the expediency criticism.

A third criticism involved the question of how to measure pleasure. From the outset, opponents of Utilitarianism doubted that pleasure could be accurately quantified, especially given that the consequences of a single action could unfold over many generations and influence thousands of people. To answer this objection, some contemporary Utilitarians have opted for either a monetary “cost/benefit” analysis (i.e., how much money does a particular action cost versus how much income will it generate?) or a simple “preference” test (of two actions, which do most people prefer?).

As you read the selections below, ask yourself whether pleasure is the same as happiness. If not, how might they differ? Also, think about whether pleasure is the only thing we desire for its own sake. Finally, how well do you think Utilitarianism conforms to our moral intuitions?

**Suggested Further Reading**


Sen, Amartya and Bernard Williams (Eds.). *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.


