

Dr. James S. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 3, Utilitarianism

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This is Dr. James S. Spiegel in his teaching on Christian ethics. This is session 3, Utilitarianism.

Okay, so let's begin our survey of major moral theories, and we'll begin with Utilitarianism.

The two most prominent philosophers when it comes to the history of Utilitarian thought are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Bentham was really the founder of modern Utilitarian thought, and John Stuart Mill, whose father was a good friend of Jeremy Bentham's. It's probably Mill, the most well-known scholar who defended utilitarianism.

It's a theory that goes back to the ancient philosopher Epicurus, who was a kind of hedonist. Hedonism is the view that the ultimate good for human beings is pleasure and that we should maximize pleasure for ourselves as well as for others. The Utilitarian brand of hedonism, which was first developed by Bentham, affirms the central claim that happiness, human happiness, is the most pleasurable life.

So, Bentham, like Epicurus, thought that the best approach to ethics is to recognize that pleasure is the moral standard. That is an objective fact. We experience things that are pleasurable and painful.

We experience a whole range of different kinds of pleasures as well as pains. Since this is something that's universally desired, everybody wants pleasure and wants to have a pleasurable life, and that seems to be a promising standard for morality. What if everybody aimed to maximize pleasure for the greatest number of people? Wouldn't that lead to the most happy life for the most people? That's the basic intuition of Utilitarianism.

Classical Utilitarianism, as it's often called, or Act Utilitarianism, applies this standard to each individual act or policy that we might consider endorsing or pursuing. So, this is the claim that Jeremy Bentham makes is that we should evaluate each action according to what he calls the principle of utility, which he says is the principle that approves or disapproves of every action according to the tendency that it appears to have to augment or diminish happiness. So that's a basic idea.

One of the great strengths of Utilitarian theory is that it's easy to understand. It's a very easily comprehended theory. We'll look at some other theories, Kant, virtue

ethics, social contract theory, natural law, and so on, that might have some more challenging concepts.

But what could be more simple than this? Act in such a way as to promote pleasure and happiness, right? Try to avoid things that are painful and try to keep from causing other people pain. That's a basic idea here. Now, an important distinctive of Bentham's Utilitarianism is that it affirms equal consideration for all.

Anyone, any being, not just human beings, but any sentient being that can experience pleasure and pain, need to be given due consideration, right? And no human being's pleasure or pain is more important than anybody else's. So, there's a very egalitarian kind of commitment here. And that's appealing to a lot of us as well.

Now, what distinguishes Bentham's utilitarianism from, say, the ancient hedonism of Epicurus is that he developed what is called pleasure-pain calculus. Now, he's living in a modern, early modern period where science is taking off, and scientists are discovering the usefulness of mathematics for understanding our world, right? Now, Bentham decided that this could be very helpful when it comes to thinking about ethics. And let's make this as scientific as possible.

So he develops pleasure-pain calculus, which evaluates the pleasure or the pain of each action according to a number of criteria. And there are seven of them. One of them is intensity, where we ask how strong the sensation is. How intense is the pain or the pleasure? Duration: how long does the pleasure or the pain last? Certainty: how likely is it that taking the action will produce pain or pleasure? Propinquity is a word that we don't hear much, but this has to do with how close in time the pleasure or the pain will follow.

How soon will it happen? Fecundity is another uncommon term that just has to do with whether, in this case, the pleasure or the pain will lead to other kinds of pleasures or pains or whether the act in question will lead to other kinds of pleasures and pains. Purity, whether the pleasure or the pain, is mixed with the opposite sensation. Will it be mostly pleasurable but also somewhat painful, or vice versa? Or is it entirely pleasurable or entirely painful? Then, the extent of the problem has to do with the number of people that will be affected.

Bentham thought that you could basically assign numerical values, positive or negative, to each of these categories when considering whether taking a particular course of action is right. Suppose I need a book for a class I'm going to take. I can't afford it right now, so I'm thinking about stealing my neighbor's text.

It's a \$70 or \$80 text. Would that be an appropriate thing to do? Well, for me, it's going to cause a little bit of pleasure. Hopefully, my conscience will be so bad that it's going to bother me severely.

That's painful. It's definitely going to cause pain for somebody else that will last a certain period of time. It's certain that they will experience that pain immediately and then also, to some degree, in a lasting way.

Even if they get over it for several days, it's going to bother them. It'll probably lead to other pains. As other people find out that that person's book was stolen, that's going to disturb them psychologically.

Even my pleasure will be mixed, hopefully, again, if I have a conscience, with a certain amount of pain, knowing that that bothered a lot of people. The extent to which that seventh criterion is applied is significant. People will find out about this.

It should be clear that I shouldn't steal this person's book. It's going to cause a lot of pain, a lot of discomfort psychologically for a lot of people. It's not going to bring me very much pleasure at all.

I should probably just buy the book or borrow it, check it out from a library or something. That's a pretty easy case, but the same pleasure-pain calculus can be applied to much more challenging moral issues. That's where Bentham thinks this is really the most promising route we have for discovering moral truth.

Again, we go back to the egalitarian thing in terms of the applicability of the usefulness of this calculus for measuring pleasures and pains and determining overall happiness. We can apply this to animals as well, which, in Bentham's day, would not have been very interesting or of much concern to very many people. But to those of us today, we recognize that animal welfare is an important thing.

Anybody who's had a pet knows that a cat, a dog, goat, chicken, or cow feels pain; they experience pain and pleasure, and so they deserve a certain regard. Now, from a Christian theological standpoint and a biblical standpoint, we know that only human beings are made in the image of God. So, the value of an animal is far less than that of humans, but they are valuable nonetheless, and their pain and their pleasure matter.

So, one of the assets or strengths of the utilitarian theory is that it has a place for considering animals and their pain and pleasure and recognizing that we need to have some sort of moral regard for them. So many point to Bentham as the historical origin of what we call the animal rights movement or animal welfare movement today. Speaking of animals, one of the major criticisms of utilitarian theory is that it is a doctrine worthy of swine.

To maintain that human beings have no higher good than pleasure puts us on the same level as, say, a pig, right, whose pleasures in life involve eating, mating, and

wallowing in mud. What is it that pigs find pleasurable? You know, it's brute pleasures like that. Surely, human beings are at a higher level than animals, and philosophers generally recognize this.

But to identify the human good as just a matter of pleasure, many argued in Bentham's day and Mill's day that that really is demeaning to human beings. So John Stuart Mill, who was the successor to Bentham as the major philosophical proponent of utilitarian theory, critiqued or replied to this objection by saying that the criticism itself represents human nature in a degrading light because it supposes, as he puts it, that human beings are capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable. But the fact is that human beings have higher pleasures, qualitatively superior pleasures.

Why? Because we have higher faculties. We have cognitive abilities that pigs don't have, that other mammals don't have. We have emotional capacities and relational capacities that these animals don't have.

And that needs to be built into this theory somehow. And so Mill defended what has since been called qualitative hedonism, which is an advance on Bentham's version of the theory. We have these other kinds of pleasures, not just pleasures of sensation, but also pleasures of the intellect and the emotion and imagination and even moral pleasures.

We get a sort of joy and satisfaction out of seeing justice being done. No dog experiences that. No dog enjoys a chess game.

I love the game of chess. I like certain other games like Settlers of Catan or playing poker. Those are intellectual pleasures, the intellectual pleasure of reading a book and seeing a good film.

As intelligent as my dog Austin is, she cannot experience the pleasure of chess or a board game or poker. So, these are higher pleasures that human beings have than animals don't. This raises the question of how you know which pleasures are qualitatively superior to other pleasures. Mill's qualitative test here is that, as he puts it, of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure.

So, this is how we can decide which pleasures are better or superior to others. If you ask me what is a superior pleasure, the pleasure of reading a book by Dostoevsky or eating a plate of spaghetti, as good as, say, my wife's spaghetti is, it doesn't compare to the pleasure I get reading Brothers Karamazov. It's a higher pleasure.

Reading poetry as opposed to playing a video game. I get a lot of pushback from students on that one. But I'd say the higher pleasure, assuming the poetry is excellent, the poetry of John Donne or William Shakespeare, would be a superior pleasure to whatever pleasure you might get playing, say, Grand Theft Auto or some video game.

So people who have experienced both kinds of pleasures would consistently give these responses. Mill says that's how you know which pleasures are best. So, it's for this reason that Mill says, as he puts it, it's better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.

It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool or the pig is of a different opinion, it's because they only know their side of the question. There are a number of factors regarding the human experience, such as our intellect and our emotions, and even when we're feeling bad, it is a qualitatively superior state just because we have these higher capacities.

Now, it might be debatable or even controversial in certain circles to make this claim about the superiority of human beings. That was Mill's view. But his main point here is that there are certain kinds of pleasures that are superior just because of their quality.

Now, an objection that some make here is, what about people who say no thank you to higher pleasures and then pursue lower pleasures? What do you say about people who just spend all their time playing video games and they don't read books at all? They're not even interested in great films. Or people who would just eat junk food and say no thank you to fine cuisine. Not interested.

I'd rather just eat my fast-food burger and fries again. There are plenty of examples of people who prefer these lower pleasures to the higher pleasures. What does Mill have to say to that? He says that that demonstrates a certain infirmity of character.

A loss of the capacity to enjoy higher pleasures or at least a loss of the capacity to appreciate the higher pleasures for what they are because of an addiction to lower pleasures. It is possible to get addicted to sodas, to fast food, to potato chips, to candy bars, all sorts of sugary foods. I sometimes, at the grocery store, see people buy huge quantities of Mountain Dew and all sorts of chips and cheese balls and whatnot and say wow, they really are addicted to this unhealthy food.

Mill would say that's an infirmity of character. It goes, that is human nature. We're prone to all sorts of addictions.

The problem is with us in that case. It's not a problem with his theory or his view. In fact, higher pleasure should be preferred, and if we prefer these lower pleasures, the problem is with us, not with his theory.

He has some things to say about a satisfied life and what it means to be a truly happy person. The two main constituents of a satisfied life are excitement and tranquility. A happy life, a balanced, happy life, will be one which is characterized by mostly tranquility, you know, peace and harmony in our lives with occasional experiences of excitement.

You don't want too much excitement in your life. Your central nervous system cannot stand that. You want mostly tranquility, minimal pain, and then periods of excitement.

The two principal causes of an unsatisfied life, he says, are selfishness and the lack of mental cultivation. It's an interesting analysis there. The problem with people who are unsatisfied in most cases, or in many cases, he would say, is because they're selfish.

They're not attending to other people's needs as much as they should, and they have not developed themselves cognitively. They haven't cultivated their minds as much as they should. If you're doing both of those things, you certainly will not be bored, and you will find satisfaction in your life.

He says a cultivated mind, a mind taught to exercise its faculties, finds sources of inexhaustible interest in all that surrounds it. And isn't this true? People who are well-read and very knowledgeable about all sorts of topics are going to find more stimulation in their daily lives and experiences than people who are not. If you have more interests, then you're a lot less likely to be bored.

And it makes you more helpful to other people. He says that a certain amount of mental culture sufficient for significant contemplation about the world should be the inheritance of everyone born in a civilized country. So, he would very much emphasize the importance of education for making people happier and more satisfied.

He believes that mental culture is a cure for social ills. Mill was very confident, as many scholars were in the modern period, that eventually, we could solve the poverty problem. We can eliminate all diseases.

Those are the two main problems it faces. He says poverty to the point of suffering may be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society combined with the good sense and providence of individuals. Even disease can eventually be conquered through the advance of medicine and scientific technology.

It's an interesting thing to note, given that since Mill's day, it seems like we have, well, we've at least identified, you know, hundreds of more diseases than were known in Mill's day. Now we know that just because of the way viruses work and mutate, viral infections and viral diseases do multiply from year to year. So I wonder if Mill would have been that sanguine about the possibility of eliminating all disease if he knew what we know today about epidemiology.

So that's basically the utilitarian theory as advanced by Bentham and Mill. Each person should be acting at all times in such a way as to maximize pleasure for everyone who's affected by their actions. That's kind of the core idea here.

And if everybody did that, then human beings would be as happy as we can be in this world. This remains a highly influential, maybe the most popular, philosophical moral theory. So what are the problems with this theory? A number of major criticisms have been brought against utilitarianism.

One of these is the problem of application. How can we know for certain what the consequences of a given action will be? If I decide to perform the action, how will it affect people? To what degree will people experience pleasure and or pain as a result of it? The problem is, as human beings, we're not omniscient, right? We don't know for certain how things will go. Even in many cases, when we think an outcome is fairly predictable, we turn out to be wrong.

Oh, I didn't expect that. If I had known that was going to happen, I wouldn't have done it. How many times have we said that? If I'd only known.

So not only can we not predict the future, we have a very limited awareness of the present and the past. But utilitarianism depends upon our ability to judge from what we have experienced so far what the outcomes of a given action will be. Now, Mill says in response to this that we have learned enough from prior experience that, for the most part, we can predict what the outcomes will be regarding a particular choice.

Well, that may be true, but again, as we've all experienced and because of the limits of our understanding regarding this particular situation I'm in, our prognosticating abilities are very limited, and they are fallible. So future or forward-looking is very difficult at times, particularly when it concerns controversial issues. So that's the problem with the application.

Another problem is the problem of justice. So, utilitarianism depends upon forward-looking, and that's difficult. It's a problem of application.

The problem of justice occurs because utilitarianism is only forward-looking and because it's only forward-looking, it's a consequentialist kind of theory. It's a theory that judges right and wrong based on the consequences of actions. Because it's only forward-looking, it actually faces problems of injustice in the sense that it seems that it can permit unjust actions and policies that apparently can be justified, at least at a local level, because there could be situations where injustices produce more pleasure than pain.

So, this is a classic criticism of utilitarian theory that could, in certain circumstances, justify slavery. So, when I'm teaching on this issue in a particular class of, say, 30 students, I will sometimes ask if anybody is celebrating a birthday this week or within the next two weeks, and usually one, maybe two hands go up. In a class of 30, good, two hands go up, and it's Joe, and it's Jane, and what I've just done in getting them to raise their hands is I've selected our slaves in a very random way.

When their birthdays are is about as random as it gets, and they're going to be our slaves in this community of 30 people, and they're going to do all of the cooking, they're going to do all of the laundry, they're going to make sure that our cars are functioning properly, you know, make sure the oil is changed in each of our cars, they're going to take care of the various issues in our compound in terms of changing light bulbs and so on. That's what they're going to do, 10 hours a day every day, and we'll let them relax Sunday afternoons, say from lunch to dinner time; that'll be their little respite from what is otherwise constant toil. But we will make sure they get adequately fed, they have decent sleeping quarters so it's not like they're in pain all day long, they're working hard, but you know the rest of us are working hard, it's just that they are designated to work for us.

So, they are our servants, and that makes them slaves. Now, would that produce more pleasure than pain in this community? Well, many would argue that actually, yes, because if we did some sort of pleasure-pain calculus, the overall pleasure value would improve for all of us. Man, if I didn't have to worry about my laundry, that'd be great.

I don't have to worry about making my own food, that'd be great. I consider that to be on a scale from 1 to 10 plus 3, 4, or 5. And if all the other people, the other 28 people in our community, make that same judgment, you know, that multiplies out pretty favorably for pro-slavery in this situation. How much pain is it causing those two slaves? Well, okay, let's say it's significant, and that is just this daily toil and not having to have, you know, an exciting private life.

I guess they could still go out at night. We could say, yeah, you can have a social life at night after you've done dinner and cleaned all our dishes. So, they get that, and we treat them kindly, right? Again, they're clothed, they're well fed, adequately rested, but it's still going to be negative.

Maybe it's, let's say it's negative 7, 8, 9, even 10 for each of them. That's still going to be more than compensated for by all of the pleasure that the rest of us are experiencing. So, for that reason, the utilitarian could, in fact, utilitarians have argued in defense of slavery down through the years.

But if you believe that slavery is unjust, as hopefully you believe, you recognize that even if more pleasure than pain is produced here, it's still problematic, right? Because things can be unjust and a violation of human rights such that maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain is irrelevant. But utilitarianism is blind to this because it's only about maximizing pleasure. It's only concerned about consequences.

It's not concerned about justice and rights. There's no place in this theory for considerations of justice and rights. That's another major problem that has been highlighted in utilitarian theory.

The problem of rights, speaking of that, is well illustrated in the Peeping Tom scenario. Utilitarianism cannot adequately account for, say, the right of privacy a person has that's violated by someone who stealthily watches them, say, through a window in their private moments. If Peeping Tom is very deft and can pull this off without the person knowing that they're being viewed, then Peeping Tom is getting a lot of pleasure, and the person who's being victimized here doesn't know it.

They're not experiencing any pain. So, from a utilitarian standpoint, it seems like that's defensible. But, hopefully, most of us would say, that's still wrong.

Even though the consequences are such that the person's experiencing more pleasure here, that's not enough to overcome the problem of the violation of rights involved here. That, again, shows a serious limitation of utilitarianism because it only pays attention to consequences, pleasures, and pains. It doesn't pay adequate attention to the consideration of rights here any more than justice.

Then, finally, there's what's called the problem of demands. If it is always our responsibility to maximize pleasure and minimize pain in every case, then the demands on us as morally serious people become overwhelming. That means you and I need to stop to help each person we see on the side of the road who's got car trouble.

That means you and I need to use only a certain amount of clothes and other property that's necessary for us to have a decent life. We should be giving the rest to the poor. We need to give any expendable income to the poor.

All our free time on any given day should not be spent in leisure when we can maximize pleasure and reduce the pain of other people. That means we should not

train ourselves on a musical instrument. Think about all the hundreds, thousands of hours that are spent by someone who's becoming classically trained as a pianist or a cello player that could have been spent working at a soup kitchen or helping the poor in some way.

It becomes irresponsible to develop a serious athletic talent or an artistic talent. That is a problem for utilitarianism because most of us would say, hopefully, that it is a morally appropriate thing to train to be a good musician or to be a good athlete, even though those things are not essential to human life and survival. The utilitarian at least implies that those things would not be responsible because they're not maximizing our ability to promote pleasure and reduce pain.

Because this is so unreasonable, it has been identified by many scholars as a serious problem with utilitarianism. The problem here, which is a kind of root difficulty, is that there is something that leads to this implication with utilitarianism. It doesn't adequately distinguish between obligatory acts and supererogatory acts.

This is a distinction between what we have a duty to do and those things, on the other hand, which are good but are not obligatory. They're above and beyond the call of duty. That's what supererogatory acts are.

They're above and beyond the call of duty. Utilitarianism does not adequately draw that distinction, and that's what leads to this problem of demands. So, those are four major problems with classical utilitarianism.

Another version of utilitarianism, known as rule utilitarianism, aims to overcome these problems and just might do so when it comes to the problem of application, the problem of justice, and maybe the problem of rights. The approach that the rule utilitarian offers is to say that we should not make our moral decisions by focusing on individual acts. Let's say that let's not assess individual acts with the principle of utility.

Rather, let's evaluate rules and general rules for living and assess those rules according to whether, if followed, they will lead to more pleasure than pain. That's the rule utilitarian idea. Live by those rules which, if followed, would result in the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people.

Now, this is a theory that actually has been defended. Various versions of this theory have been defended, many of which fall into the general category of social contract ethics. And we'll talk about social contract theory later.

The social contractarian says we should set up all of society in such a way that there are certain basic rules that we should all abide by, and we just select those rules

which, if followed, will maximize pleasure in society. We live in such a society. We have a social contract, and it's called the U.S. Constitution.

We have a Bill of Rights, and there are just all sorts of rules there that are spelled out that our founding fathers decided that if we organize our society accordingly, it's going to give us our best chance at widespread happiness. So that's kind of an application of rule utilitarianism. But there are other forms as well.

But later on, in a separate lecture, we'll talk about social contract ethics. But that does it for utilitarianism.

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