

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

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 3, Utilitarianism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. James S. Spiegel's lecture on Christian ethics introduces utilitarianism as a prominent moral theory, tracing its origins to thinkers like Epicurus, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. Bentham's classical utilitarianism emphasizes maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain for the greatest number, employing a "pleasure-pain calculus" for evaluating actions and advocating for equal consideration, even for sentient animals. Mill refined this by distinguishing between higher intellectual and emotional pleasures and lower sensory pleasures, arguing for the superiority of the former and highlighting mental cultivation and tranquility as key to a satisfied life. The lecture then explores several criticisms of utilitarianism, including issues of practical application, potential for injustice and rights violations, and the demanding nature of always maximizing pleasure. Finally, it briefly introduces rule utilitarianism as an alternative that evaluates general rules based on their potential to produce overall happiness, contrasting it with act utilitarianism.

**2. 13 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 3 – Double click icon to
play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (Theology → Apologetics → Christian Ethics).**



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3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 3, Utilitarianism

Briefing Document: Utilitarianism

1. Introduction:

This briefing document summarizes the key themes and important ideas presented by Dr. James S. Spiegel in Session 3 of his Christian Ethics course, focusing on Utilitarianism. The session provides an overview of this major moral theory, tracing its historical roots, explaining its core principles, highlighting its strengths, and detailing significant criticisms. It also briefly introduces rule utilitarianism as a potential response to some of these criticisms.

2. Main Themes and Important Ideas:

- **Definition and Core Principle:** Utilitarianism, at its core, is a moral theory that asserts that the right action or policy is the one that produces the greatest happiness (pleasure) for the greatest number of people. Bentham's "principle of utility" approves or disapproves of actions based on their tendency to "augment or diminish happiness."
- **Quote:** "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."
- **Historical Roots:** The theory can be traced back to the ancient hedonist Epicurus, who believed pleasure was the ultimate good. Jeremy Bentham is identified as the founder of modern Utilitarianism, with John Stuart Mill being its most well-known defender.
- **Quote:** "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... It's probably Mill, the most well-known scholar who defended utilitarianism."
- **Bentham's Quantitative Hedonism:** Bentham believed that pleasure is the moral standard and developed the "pleasure-pain calculus" to objectively evaluate

actions based on seven criteria: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent. He advocated for equal consideration for all sentient beings capable of experiencing pleasure and pain.

- **Quote:** "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."
- **Mill's Qualitative Hedonism:** Mill refined utilitarianism by arguing that pleasures differ in quality, not just quantity. He asserted that higher, intellectual and emotional pleasures, accessible through our higher faculties, are superior to lower, sensual pleasures. His test for determining the quality of pleasure involves the preference of those who have experienced both.
- **Quote:** "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."
- **Quote:** "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."
- **Quote:** "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."
- **Mill on a Satisfied Life:** Mill believed a satisfied life consists of excitement and tranquility, with tranquility being the predominant element. He identified selfishness and lack of mental cultivation as the principal causes of an unsatisfied life, emphasizing the importance of education and intellectual development.
- **Quote:** "The two main constituents of a satisfied life are excitement and tranquility... The two principal causes of an unsatisfied life, he says, are selfishness and the lack of mental cultivation."
- **Strengths of Utilitarianism:** Spiegel highlights the theory's ease of understanding and its inclusion of animals in moral consideration, recognizing their capacity for pleasure and pain. Bentham is seen as a historical origin of the animal rights/welfare movement.

- **Quote:** "One of the great strengths of Utilitarian theory is that it's easy to understand. It's a very easily comprehended theory... 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."
- **Criticisms of Utilitarianism:** Several major criticisms are discussed:
- **Problem of Application:** The difficulty of accurately predicting the consequences of actions and the extent to which they will produce pleasure or pain due to our limited knowledge of the present, past, and future.
- **Quote:** "How can we know for certain what the consequences of a given action will be?"
- **Problem of Justice:** Utilitarianism, being purely forward-looking and consequentialist, can seemingly justify unjust actions (like slavery) if they lead to a greater overall balance of pleasure over pain. It lacks inherent consideration for justice and rights.
- **Quote:** "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."
- **Problem of Rights:** The theory struggles to adequately account for individual rights, as demonstrated by the Peeping Tom scenario, where pleasure is gained without the victim experiencing pain, yet a right to privacy is clearly violated.
- **Quote:** "Utilitarianism cannot adequately account for, say, the right of privacy a person has that's violated by someone who stealthily watches them... from a utilitarian standpoint, it seems like that's defensible. But, hopefully, most of us would say, that's still wrong."
- **Problem of Demands:** The requirement to always maximize pleasure and minimize pain places overwhelming demands on individuals, blurring the line between obligatory acts and supererogatory acts. Activities not directly contributing to maximizing overall happiness (like pursuing artistic talents) could be deemed morally irresponsible.
- **Quote:** "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... It becomes irresponsible to develop a serious athletic talent or an artistic talent."

- **Rule Utilitarianism:** This alternative form of utilitarianism attempts to address some of the criticisms by suggesting that moral decisions should be based on general rules that, if followed, would lead to the greatest overall happiness, rather than focusing on individual acts. Social contract ethics is mentioned as a category in which rule utilitarianism often falls.
- **Quote:** "The approach that the rule utilitarian offers is to say that we should not make our moral decisions by focusing on individual acts... 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."
- **Concluding Thoughts:** Despite its criticisms, utilitarianism remains a highly influential moral theory.

3. Potential Discussion Points:

- The tension between maximizing happiness and ensuring justice and individual rights.
- The practical difficulties of applying the pleasure-pain calculus, even in its more qualitative form.
- The implications of utilitarianism for personal pursuits and the concept of moral obligation.
- The potential benefits and drawbacks of rule utilitarianism compared to act utilitarianism.
- The Christian perspective on pleasure and happiness as moral guides, considering the concept of being made in the image of God.

4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 3, Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism: A Study Guide

Key Concepts and Thinkers:

- **Utilitarianism:** A moral theory that holds that the right action is the one that maximizes overall happiness and minimizes overall pain for all those affected.
- **Hedonism:** The view that pleasure is the ultimate good and pain is the ultimate evil. Utilitarianism adopts a form of hedonism.
- **Jeremy Bentham:** Considered the founder of modern Utilitarianism, advocating for the "greatest happiness principle."
- **John Stuart Mill:** A prominent defender and later modifier of Utilitarianism, who introduced the concept of qualitative differences in pleasures.
- **Principle of Utility:** Bentham's central principle, which states that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.
- **Pleasure-Pain Calculus:** Bentham's system for evaluating the potential pleasure or pain of an action based on seven criteria: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent.
- **Sentient Beings:** Any being capable of experiencing pleasure and pain. Bentham argued that the interests of all sentient beings should be considered in moral calculations.
- **Qualitative Hedonism:** Mill's view that pleasures differ in quality as well as quantity, with intellectual and moral pleasures being superior to purely sensual pleasures.
- **Rule Utilitarianism:** A form of utilitarianism that focuses on establishing and following general rules that, if consistently applied, would lead to the greatest overall happiness.
- **Act Utilitarianism (Classical Utilitarianism):** The original form of utilitarianism, which applies the principle of utility directly to each individual action.
- **Consequentialism:** The ethical theory that judges the morality of an action based on its consequences. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory.

- **Obligatory Acts:** Actions that one has a duty to perform.
- **Supererogatory Acts:** Actions that are morally good but not required or obligatory; they go "above and beyond the call of duty."

Short-Answer Quiz:

1. Who are the two most prominent philosophers associated with the development of Utilitarianism, and what are their key contributions?
2. Explain the core principle of Utilitarianism in your own words. What is the ultimate moral standard according to this theory?
3. Describe Bentham's pleasure-pain calculus. What was its purpose, and what are some of the criteria it considers when evaluating an action?
4. How did John Stuart Mill's view of pleasure differ from Jeremy Bentham's? Explain the concept of "higher" and "lower" pleasures.
5. What is Mill's test for determining which pleasures are qualitatively superior to others? Provide an example to illustrate this test.
6. According to Mill, what are the two main constituents of a satisfied life and the two principal causes of an unsatisfied life?
7. What is one of the major strengths of Utilitarianism, particularly in relation to who or what should be considered in moral deliberations?
8. Describe the "problem of justice" as a criticism of Utilitarianism. Provide an example discussed in the source material that illustrates this problem.
9. Explain the "problem of demands" as a criticism of Utilitarianism. How does it relate to the distinction between obligatory and supererogatory acts?
10. Briefly explain the difference between Act Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism, and what problem(s) Rule Utilitarianism aims to address.

Answer Key:

1. The two most prominent philosophers are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Bentham is considered the founder of modern Utilitarianism and established the principle of utility and the pleasure-pain calculus. Mill was a key defender and refined the theory by introducing the concept of qualitative differences in pleasures.

2. The core principle of Utilitarianism is that the morally right action is the one that produces the greatest amount of happiness (pleasure) and the least amount of pain for the greatest number of people (or sentient beings affected). The ultimate moral standard is the overall balance of happiness over unhappiness resulting from an action.
3. Bentham's pleasure-pain calculus is a system designed to scientifically evaluate the potential pleasure or pain of an action. It considers seven criteria: intensity (strength), duration (length), certainty (likelihood), propinquity (closeness in time), fecundity (likelihood of leading to other pleasures/pains), purity (degree of mixed sensation), and extent (number of people affected). Its purpose was to provide a more objective and quantitative basis for moral decision-making.
4. Mill disagreed with Bentham's view that all pleasures are equal. He argued that pleasures differ in quality, not just quantity. "Higher" pleasures, such as intellectual, emotional, and moral ones, are qualitatively superior to "lower" or purely sensual pleasures, even if the latter are more intense or long-lasting.
5. Mill's test for determining the qualitative superiority of pleasures involves consulting those who have experienced both types of pleasure. If nearly all who are competent judges give a decided preference to one pleasure over another, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, then that pleasure is considered superior. For example, the pleasure of reading Dostoevsky is deemed superior to eating spaghetti by those who have truly appreciated both.
6. According to Mill, the two main constituents of a satisfied life are excitement and tranquility, with tranquility being the more fundamental. The two principal causes of an unsatisfied life are selfishness (not attending to others' needs) and the lack of mental cultivation (not developing one's cognitive faculties).
7. One major strength of Utilitarianism, as highlighted in the source, is its egalitarian consideration for all sentient beings. Bentham argued that any being capable of experiencing pleasure and pain deserves moral consideration, and no individual's pleasure or pain is inherently more important than another's. This laid the groundwork for considering animal welfare.
8. The "problem of justice" arises because Utilitarianism is solely forward-looking and consequentialist, potentially allowing actions that seem intuitively unjust if they maximize overall happiness. The slavery example illustrates this: a utilitarian could argue that the pleasure experienced by the majority in a slave-owning

society outweighs the pain of the enslaved minority, thus justifying an unjust practice.

9. The "problem of demands" suggests that if one must always act to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, the moral obligations on individuals become excessively demanding. Activities like pursuing artistic or athletic talents, which don't directly maximize overall happiness, could be seen as morally irresponsible. This criticism points to Utilitarianism's difficulty in distinguishing between obligatory acts and supererogatory acts.
10. Act Utilitarianism applies the principle of utility directly to each individual action, assessing whether that specific act will produce the greatest happiness. Rule Utilitarianism, on the other hand, focuses on establishing general rules that, if followed consistently, would lead to the greatest overall happiness. Rule Utilitarianism aims to overcome problems like the justification of unjust acts and the overwhelming demands of Act Utilitarianism by focusing on the long-term consequences of adhering to beneficial rules.

Essay Format Questions:

1. Discuss the strengths of Utilitarianism as a moral theory, highlighting its appeal and potential benefits for ethical decision-making.
2. Critically analyze the "problem of justice" as a significant objection to Utilitarianism. Use examples to illustrate why this criticism poses a challenge to the theory's validity.
3. Evaluate John Stuart Mill's attempt to refine Utilitarianism through his concept of qualitative hedonism. Did this modification successfully address the criticism that Utilitarianism is a "doctrine worthy of swine"?
4. Explore the practical challenges involved in applying the principle of utility in real-world situations. Consider issues such as predicting consequences and measuring happiness and pain.
5. Compare and contrast Act Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach in guiding moral conduct?

5. FAQs on Spiegel, Christian Ethics, Session 3, Utilitarianism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions on Utilitarianism

1. What is the core principle of Utilitarianism? Utilitarianism, at its heart, is a moral theory stating that the right action is the one that maximizes happiness (pleasure) and minimizes pain for the greatest number of people. It evaluates actions and policies based on their consequences, aiming to produce the most overall well-being.

2. Who are the key figures associated with Utilitarianism, and what were their main contributions? Jeremy Bentham is considered the founder of modern Utilitarianism, establishing the principle of utility and developing the pleasure-pain calculus to quantitatively assess the moral value of actions based on factors like intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent of pleasure or pain. John Stuart Mill, a prominent successor, refined the theory by introducing the concept of qualitative hedonism, arguing that intellectual and moral pleasures are superior in quality to purely sensual pleasures, even if less intense. He famously stated, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."

3. How does Bentham's "pleasure-pain calculus" work in evaluating actions?

Bentham's pleasure-pain calculus is a framework for assessing the potential pleasure and pain resulting from an action by considering seven criteria: intensity (strength of sensation), duration (how long it lasts), certainty (likelihood of occurrence), propinquity (how soon it will occur), fecundity (likelihood of leading to other pleasures or pains), purity (degree to which it is unmixed with the opposite sensation), and extent (number of people affected). By assigning potential numerical values (positive for pleasure, negative for pain) to each of these criteria, one could theoretically calculate the overall utility of an action.

4. What is the distinction between Bentham's quantitative hedonism and Mill's qualitative hedonism? Bentham's hedonism is quantitative, meaning he believed that all pleasures are essentially equal and differ only in their quantity (intensity and duration). Mill, however, argued for qualitative hedonism, asserting that some pleasures are inherently superior to others in quality, not just quantity. He believed that pleasures of the intellect, emotions, imagination, and moral sentiments are of a higher order than purely physical sensations because they engage our higher faculties as human beings. Mill proposed a test to determine the quality of a pleasure: if those who have experienced both consistently prefer one over the other, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation, then that pleasure is qualitatively superior.

5. What are some of the major criticisms raised against classical (Act) Utilitarianism? Several significant criticisms have been leveled against classical Utilitarianism. These include the problem of application (the difficulty of accurately predicting the long-term consequences of actions), the problem of justice (it can potentially justify unjust actions if they lead to a greater overall balance of pleasure over pain, such as slavery or punishing an innocent person), the problem of rights (it does not inherently recognize individual rights, as the focus is solely on aggregate well-being, potentially allowing for the violation of rights if it maximizes overall happiness, such as in the Peeping Tom scenario), and the problem of demands (it seems to require individuals to constantly act to maximize pleasure and minimize pain for everyone, leading to potentially overwhelming and unreasonable moral obligations, blurring the line between obligatory and supererogatory acts).

6. How does Rule Utilitarianism attempt to address some of the shortcomings of Act Utilitarianism? Rule Utilitarianism offers an alternative approach by suggesting that instead of applying the principle of utility to individual actions, we should evaluate general rules. A rule is considered morally right if its general adoption would lead to a greater balance of pleasure over pain in society than alternative rules or no rule at all. This approach aims to overcome some of the problems of Act Utilitarianism, such as issues of justice and rights, by establishing rules that generally promote well-being and prevent actions that might maximize happiness in a specific instance but are fundamentally unjust or violate rights. It also potentially simplifies moral decision-making by providing general guidelines to follow.

7. How does Utilitarianism view the moral consideration of animals? Bentham's Utilitarianism was groundbreaking in its inclusion of animals in moral consideration. He argued that the capacity to experience pleasure and pain, rather than rationality or language, should be the basis for moral concern. Therefore, any sentient being capable of feeling pleasure and pain deserves moral consideration, and their suffering should be taken into account when evaluating actions. This perspective is seen as a historical precursor to the modern animal rights and welfare movements. While acknowledging a Christian theological view that humans have a unique status as being made in God's image, the theory still suggests that animal pain and pleasure matter morally.

8. What are the two main constituents of a satisfied life according to Mill, and what are the principal causes of an unsatisfied life? According to Mill, the two main constituents of a satisfied life are excitement and tranquility. He believed that a balanced and happy life involves primarily tranquility (peace and harmony) with occasional experiences of excitement. The two principal causes of an unsatisfied life, he argued, are selfishness (not attending to the needs of others) and the lack of mental cultivation (not developing one's cognitive abilities). Mill emphasized that a cultivated mind finds inexhaustible sources of interest and contributes to a more satisfied and helpful life.