# Utilitarianism

**Ethics**
University of Bayreuth, Summer 2025

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# 2 **Today**
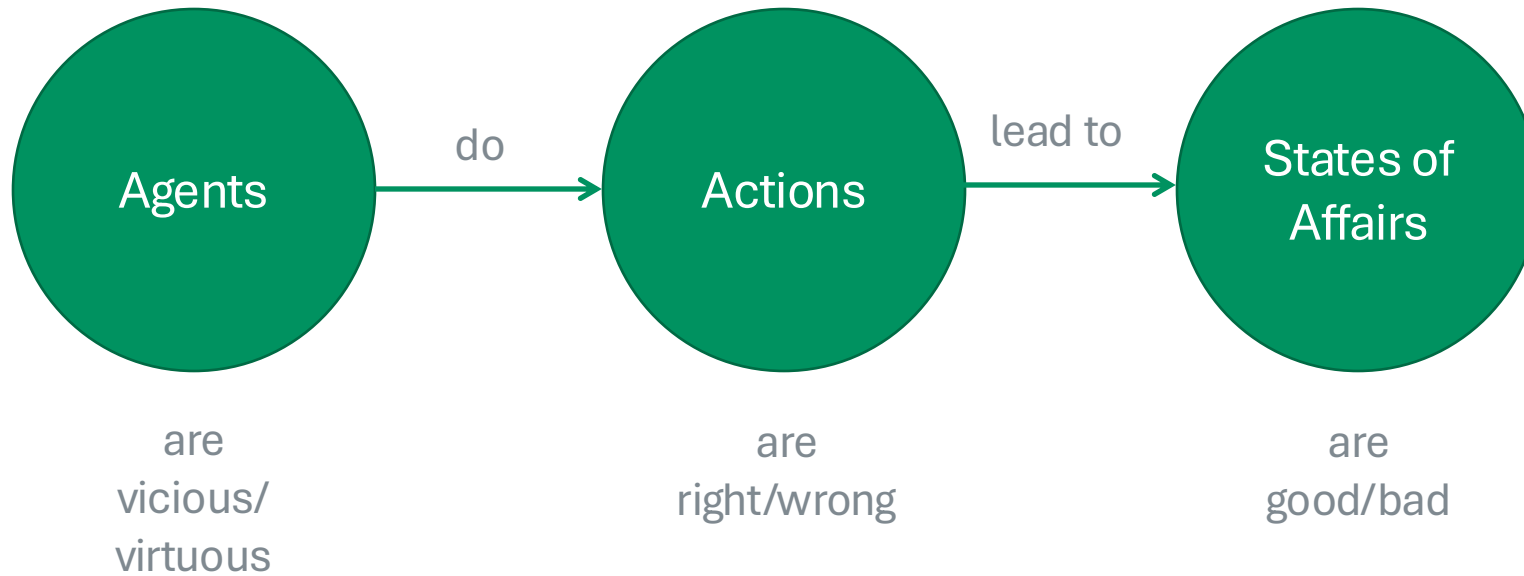
# 3 Introduction

- In **normative ethics**, we try to find the most basic normative (action-guiding) principle(s)
  - Can we state a fundamental principle which explains how we should act in all cases?
- Normative ethics does **not** make empirical claims about
  - how people act or will predictably act
  - what anyone, or any society, considers to be right, good, or virtuous

# 4 Schema

Agents → do → Actions → lead to → States of Affairs

are
vicious/
virtuous

are
right/wrong

are
good/bad

Is any of these dimensions primary?

# 5 Schema

**Agents**

are primary:
**virtue ethics**

First: we inquire what a virtuous agent is like.

Then: You ought to do what virtuous agents would do.

**Actions**

are primary:
**deontology**

First: we find out which actions are right, and which are wrong.

Then: You ought to do those actions which are intrinsically right.

**States of Affairs**

are primary:
**consequentialism**

First: we explore what makes states of affairs good or bad.

Then: You ought to do what brings about the best state of affairs.

# **Utilitarianism** and Its Normative Implications

# 7 Motivating Utilitarianism by Analogy

**Individual Rationality:** An action is rational (for you) if it maximises your own (life-long) welfare

**+ First Idea:** Morality possesses the same general structure as rationality: (only) welfare matters, and we should apply means-end reasoning

**+ Second Idea:** morality is **universalistic** and **egalitarian**: everyone matters, and everyone matters equally (Sidgwick: 'point of view of the Universe')

**= Utilitarian Morality:** An action is morally right if it maximises everyone's welfare (that is, the sum of welfare in the world)

# 8  Utilitarianism

> **Standard Utilitarianism.** An action is right if and only if the action, from among available alternatives, brings about the state of affairs with the greatest total welfare

- There is **nothing** which intrinsically ought not to be done—there is no **fundamental** moral rule like 'keep your promises', 'don't kill', etc.

- Most classical utilitarians were also hedonists, but hedonism is **not** essential to utilitarianism, and most contemporary utilitarians are not hedonists

**History of Utilitarianism**

- Three classical utilitarians
  - Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832): quantitative hedonism
  - John Stuart Mill (1806-1873): *On Utilitarianism*, qualitative hedonism
  - Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900): *Methods of Ethics*

- Later influential utilitarians
  - G. E. Moore (1873-1958)
  - Richard Hare (1919-2002): two-level utilitarianism
  - Peter Singer (1946-): animal ethics

- Contemporary: effective altruism movement

# General Implications

- There is no fundamental difference between people close to you and people far away
    - If you can spend money on expensive life-saving medicine for your mother, or on cheap life-saving medicine for many African children, you should spend your money on the latter
- There is no fundamental difference between doing something or letting something happen
    - No difference between TRANSPLANT and TROLLEY DRIVER (see lecture 1)
    - If I watch Netflix on a Friday evening, or meet my friends, there are many better things that I could have done with my time and money

# 11  Examples: Charitable Giving and Career Choice

- Effective Altruism (effectivealtruism.org; givingwhatwecan.org)
    - Everyday idea: almost any charitable giving is (equally) morally good; you should give for causes that you have a personal connection to
    - But: different charities are wildly different in impact (mosquito nets versus dogs for the blind)
    - (Giving effectively is not an exclusively utilitarian idea)
- Utilitarian Career Choice
    - "You have 80,000 hours in your career" (80000hours.org): how to maximise your impact?
    - First thought: work for an NGO, or become a doctor, or a public defender, or a political activist
    - But: in many of these careers, you make little difference, given larger structural forces and the abundance of talent in those fields (replacement effect)
    - One suggestion: you ought to enter a career where you maximize your life-time earnings (e.g., banker, consultant), and give as much as money as you can

# **Five Components** of Utilitarianism

**Utilitarianism: Five Commitments**

> Standard Utilitarianism. An action is right if and only if the action, from among available alternatives, brings about the state of affairs with the greatest total welfare

1. **Consequentialism.** The rightness of an action is entirely determined by the goodness of the state of affairs it brings about.

2. **Focus on Actions.** The primary object of moral evaluation are actions.

3. **Maximisation.** An action is right only if it brings about the best consequences.

4. **Welfarism.** The goodness of a state of affairs is solely determined by welfare.

5. **Sum-Ranking.** The goodness of a state of affairs is the sum of welfare in it.

# 14  Evaluative Focus

> (2) Focus on Actions. The primary object of moral evaluation are actions.

- Alternatively, we could focus on rules (Hooker) or motives (Adams)

- **Rule utilitarianism** proposes that we follow a two-step procedure:
  1. find the utility-maximising rules
  2. evaluate actions according to the rules

- Example: 'keep your promises' maximises social value, so not keeping your promises is wrong

**Rule-Utilitarianism: Collapse Objection**

Rule-Utilitarianism. An action is right if and only if the action accords with the rules, acceptance of which brings about the state of affairs with the greatest total welfare.

- Start with the rule 'keep your promises'

- Imagine there is a situation A in which ignoring the rule better promotes utility

- So the rule-utilitarianism should endorse the rule 'keep your promises, except in situation A'

- We can reiterate for situations B, C, ..., until we get to the rule 'keep your promises, except when breaking your promise maximises utility'

- But then it seems that rule-utilitarianism collapses into act-utilitarianism!

# 16 Maximisation

(3) Maximisation. An action is right only if it brings about the best consequences.

An alternative would be

Satisficing Utilitarianism. An action is right if and only if, from among the available alternatives, it brings about **enough** total welfare

Objections

- It is difficult to specify what 'enough welfare' means
- This proposal might confuse an intuitive rule with a critical rule (more later)

# 17 Welfarism

(4) Welfarism. The goodness of a state of affairs is **solely** determined by welfare

- Welfarism is neutral between different theories of welfare
- Welfarism is **not** limited to human welfare; any animal or entity which our theory of welfare deems capable of welfare counts
- Against welfarism, we might think that non-human nature matters
  - Example: Imagine that we could destroy a lifeless but aesthetically unique planet

# 18 Sum-Ranking

(5) Sum-Ranking. The goodness of a state of affairs is the sum of welfare in it.

- A troubling counterexample?
  - Distribution D1: 1 million people enjoy welfare of 1 each
    Distribution D2: One person has welfare of 2 million, and 999,999 have no welfare
  - If we accept sum-ranking, then D2 is morally better than D1

- **Prioritarianism** (Parfit): the moral value of the welfare of an entity decreases the more welfare it possesses
  - For the prioritarian, D1 will be morally better than D2
  - Not to be confused with the **thesis of decreasing marginal utility**: the additional utility gained from additional resources decreases with the number of resources enjoyed

# Discussion

Discuss a version of utilitarianism that drops one of the ideas 2 to 5. What advantages might it have over a standard utilitarianism?

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2.  **Focus on Actions.** The primary object of moral evaluation are actions.

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# The Demandingness Objection

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P1      According to utilitarianism, we constantly ought to make big personal sacrifices, and would be rarely if ever allowed to pursue personal interests

P2      An adequate ethical theory cannot require us to constantly make big personal sacrifices, and it must allow us to reliably pursue personal interests

Therefore,

C1      Utilitarianism is not an adequate ethical theory

**Responses to the Demandingness Objection**

- **Denial** (reject P1): utilitarianism does **not** normally require large sacrifices
  - Option 1: The best choice in practice is to follow established rules of morality (Sidgwick)
  - Option 2: Modify the theory, e.g. satisficing utilitarianism

- **Extremism** (reject P2): it is **no objection** if a moral theory requires large sacrifices
  - Option 1: P2 is based on ordinary morality, but we should reject ordinary morality (Unger)
  - Option 2: morality *is* demanding, as attention to moral intuitions and cases reveals (Singer)

# The Uncertainty Objection
## (or Cluelessness Objection)

# 24 Unforeseeable Consequences

A child is drowning in the lake. Should you save the child?

- Yes!

- But what if this person will be the great-grandmother of Hitler 2.0? Then no.

- But what if Hitler 2.0 will commit genocide, and this genocide inspires a human genius who invents space travel, which leads to humanity spreading across the galaxy, creating billions of billions of happy lives? Then yes.

- But what if …

**The Uncertainty Objection**

P1      According to consequentialism, what we ought to do is determined by the long-term effects of our actions

P2      We have no idea what the long-term effects of any of our actions will be

Therefore,

C1      If consequentialism is true, then we have no idea what we ought to do

P3      An adequate moral theory must give us some idea what we ought to do

Therefore,

C2      Consequentialism is not an adequate moral theory

Adopted from https://utilitarianism.net/objections-to-utilitarianism/cluelessness/

# **Discussion**

How might one respond to the uncertainty objection?

**Responses to the Uncertainty Objection**

- Reject P2: we have **some** idea of long-term consequences
  - we might not have precise knowledge of consequences, but we often have some idea
  - 'ripples in a lake': positive and negative long-term consequences even out
  - partners in crime: other moral theories have the same problem, and the problem also arises when making every-day decisions in non-moral contexts

- Reject P3: moral theories do **not** (always) need to be action-guiding
  - It is no fault of a *moral theory* if it does not tell us what we ought to do
  - It is a mistake to think that a moral theory must provide us with precise moral action-guidance

# **Indirect Utilitarianism**

**The Paradox of Hedonism**

- If your aim is to pursue pleasure, but you intentionally aim at pleasure all the time, you might achieve less pleasure overall
  - Example: if you read a book for pleasure, constantly trying to find the reading experience pleasurable might undermine the experience; instead, you have the most enjoyment if you 'lose yourself' in the book

- You sometimes achieve your goals best by not aiming at your goals!
  - Example: if you constantly think about making friends, you might have a lower chance of making friends (because you'll be awkward)

**Resolving the Paradox of Hedonism**

- Sidgwick: we should adopt an 'alternating rhythm' (*Methods of Ethics*, 136) between aiming for pleasure and aiming for the activities themselves
  - Example: you sometimes think about how you can become more socially desirable to others, but when you actually interact with others, you don't think about that
  - Example: you think about what reading experiences have been pleasurable, but once you have picked a book, your focus on the experience of reading itself, not thinking about pleasure
- This method of alternating rhythm seems intuitive, and something we already psychologically follow it in many contexts

# 31  Indirect Utilitarianism

**Indirect Hedonism**: Often the best way to achieve pleasure is by not aiming at pleasure

By analogy:

**Indirect Utilitarianism**: Often the best way to maximise total welfare is by not aiming at maximising total welfare

**Two-Level Utilitarianism** (R. M. Hare)

- We can think about morality on the **intuitive level**
  - This is the every-day level of ethical decision-making
  - We follow various rules of ordinary morality: don't lie, don't kill, give priority to your family and friends, etc.
- We can think about morality on the **critical level**
  - Here, we apply the rules of utilitarianism
  - We switch to the critical level when needed
- Perfect beings would only need the critical level ('archangels') and very dumb beings could only act on the intuitive level ('proles'); humans need both
- One critical question: how do we (humans) switch between the levels?

# **Discussion**

1. Can indirect utilitarianism help us with the demandingness objection?
2. What objections against indirect utilitarianism can you think of?

**Objections to Indirect Utilitarianism**

- **Indistinctiveness**. If indirect utilitarianism is in practice indistinguishable from non-utilitarian moral views, then it is no longer a distinct moral theory

- **Psychological Impossibility** (Williams). Indirect utilitarianism requires us to operate on two separate mental levels, but the average person is not psychologically capable of keeping those apart in the long run

- **Schizophrenia** (Stocker) or **Integrity** (Williams). Indirect utilitarianism requires us to operate on two separate mental levels. Even if this is psychologically possible, our fundamental unity is undermined: we become schizophrenic, our life lacks integrity

**Summary**

- Utilitarianism claims that an action is right if and only if it maximises total welfare
- Utilitarianism, in practice, has various radical implications
- Utilitarianism can be understood as a combination of five commitments
- Consequentialism is a generalised form of utilitarianism
- Two prominent objections to utilitarianism are based on uncertainty and demandingness
- Indirect utilitarianism tries to make utilitarianism less radical, but faces its own objections

**Tutorials & Next Week**

- Text for this week, discussed in tutorials: Mill, *On Utilitarianism*, ch. 2 and ch. 4
  - The classical defence of utilitarianism (and qualitative hedonism!)
  - Also contains a famous attempt at a 'proof' of utilitarianism (which most philosophers think mistaken)
  - Look out for hints at indirect utilitarianism (p. 219-220) and Mill's answer to something like the cluelessness objection (p. 224-5)
- Background text: Driver, 'Modern consequentialism'
- Next week: Deontological ethics/Kant