

Utilitarianism

B Eggleston, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA

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Glossary

Aggregation The view that the value of a state of affairs is determined by summing or averaging the values associated with the individuals in that state of affairs.

Consequentialism The view that the rightness and wrongness of acts depends entirely on facts about the consequences of acts.

Individualism The view that the sources of value to be found in the world are individuals, such as persons and animals.

Maximization The view that the value of a state of affairs should be made as great as possible.

Utilitarianism An ethical theory according to which the rightness and wrongness of acts depends entirely on facts about the maximization of overall well-being.

Welfarism The view that the goodness and badness of consequences, or states of affairs, depends entirely on facts about well-being, or welfare.

Introduction and Historical Background

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory according to which the rightness and wrongness of acts depends entirely on facts about the maximization of overall well-being. It is commonly associated with the phrase ‘the greatest good for the greatest number,’ and it typically requires people to act in whatever way will result in the greatest possible amount of well-being, where well-being is understood as closely related to happiness. In this article, after a brief account of the historical sources of utilitarianism, the following topics will be explored: the defining characteristics of all forms of utilitarianism, the differences among various forms of utilitarianism, objections to utilitarianism, and the application of utilitarianism to moral problems.

Traces of utilitarian thought can be found in the works of Plato and Aristotle, but not until the eighteenth century did utilitarianism truly begin to emerge as a well-defined and freestanding ethical theory. From that century to the present, six authors can be identified as having made especially significant contributions to the articulation of utilitarian ideas. First, in the middle of the eighteenth century, David Hume argued in his ethical writings that much of our moral thinking is ultimately determined by what we find agreeable. This line of argument, though essentially descriptive and psychological and not an affirmation of utilitarianism per se, suggests that utilitarianism’s focus on well-being has a strong basis in human nature. Second, Jeremy Bentham wrote the first full treatise on utilitarianism, with his 1789 work *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* offering a detailed exposition of a form of utilitarianism and an application of it to such matters as criminal and penal law. Third, John Stuart Mill offered his own account of the theory in his 1861 essay *Utilitarianism*. Mill sought to

formulate a version of utilitarianism that built on the strengths of Bentham’s rigorous thinking but also included more thoughtful accounts of well-being, moral motivation, and the role of moral rules in utilitarian reasoning about moral problems. Today, Mill’s essay is almost certainly the single most widely read account of utilitarianism.

Fourth, Henry Sidgwick wrote what is widely regarded as the most thorough, systematic, and philosophically subtle treatise on utilitarianism, with his *The Methods of Ethics* being published in several editions in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. Fifth, R. M. Hare published several books and articles in the second half of the twentieth century in which he argued that a form of utilitarianism is entailed by the most plausible meta-ethical theory of the meaning of moral terms such as ‘ought.’ In addition to grounding utilitarian in a sophisticated (if controversial) meta-ethical theory, he defended it as a reasonable way of solving a variety of moral problems. Finally, in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, Peter Singer has also applied utilitarianism to a variety of moral problems. In addition to publishing books and papers read largely by professional philosophers, Singer has made extensive use of other media, such as newspaper articles and television broadcasts, to publicly argue for utilitarian approaches to matters such as the treatment of animals, poverty relief, and issues in medical ethics.

The Defining Characteristics of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is effectively defined by five characteristics: consequentialism, welfarism, individualism, aggregation,

and maximization. Here, each of these views is explained and distinguished from incompatible views.

Consequentialism is the view that the rightness and wrongness of acts depends entirely on facts about the consequences of acts. For example, the claim that an act is right if and only if its consequences are at least as good as those of any other act that could have been performed instead is a consequentialist claim. Opposing views include ones on which the rightness and wrongness of acts depends, in part or whole, on their conformity to moral rules whose content is determined by facts about things other than the consequences of acts. Examples of such nonconsequentialist views include intuitionist ones on which moral rules are known intuitively (without further analysis), Kantian ones on which moral rules are identified as ones that pass a certain test of universalizability, and social-contract views on which moral rules are identified as ones on which parties in circumstances of certain kinds would agree. Utilitarianism, being committed to consequentialism, is incompatible with such views.

Welfarism is the view that the goodness and badness of consequences, or states of affairs, depends entirely on facts about well-being, or welfare. This component of utilitarianism is sometimes characterized in terms of happiness instead of well-being, and such terminology is acceptable as long as happiness is understood broadly, along the lines of general flourishing or thriving in one's life, and not merely as a mental state (notwithstanding the fact, discussed later, that some theorists of well-being regard it as essentially reducible to mental states). In any event, an example of a welfarist claim is the claim that one state of affairs is better than another if and only if it contains a greater amount of well-being. Opposing views are ones on which the goodness and badness of consequences depends, in part or whole, on facts about things other than well-being, such as facts about the amount of beauty in the world or facts about whether people are living in accordance with the plan of a certain supposed deity. Unless such facts are ultimately understood to be facts about well-being (as in the claim that living in accordance with a certain divine plan enhances one's well-being), regarding them as relevant to the determination of the goodness and badness of consequences is incompatible with welfarism and, hence, utilitarianism. Well-being is sometimes termed 'utility,' and this is the sense of 'utility' at the root of the term 'utilitarianism.'

Individualism is the view that the sources of value to be found in the world are individuals, such as persons and animals. For example, the claim that only individuals are proper objects of moral regard, and that nations or tribes are not, is an individualist claim. Opposing views, as just suggested, include ones on which collectivities such as nations, tribes, organizations, and corporations are sources of value, over and above whatever value might be

associated with the individual people they comprise. Additional opposing views include ones on which such things as ecosystems and ecological diversity are sources of value, over and above whatever value might be associated with the individual organisms that inhabit those ecosystems or give rise to that ecological diversity. Utilitarianism, being committed to individualism, is incompatible with such views.

Aggregation is the view that the value of a state of affairs is determined by summing (or averaging, as discussed later) the values associated with the individuals in that state of affairs. Opposing views include ones on which the value of a state of affairs is determined by imposing some other mathematical function on the values associated with the individuals in that state of affairs, such as simply reading off the minimum value, or summing the values associated with the individuals but then also taking into account the degree of equality or inequality among those values, or computing a weighted average of the values associated with the individuals, where the lower values (alternatively, the higher values) are weighted more heavily. Such views might have much else in common with utilitarianism (e.g., they might be consequentialist, welfarist, and individualist), but their divergence from aggregation makes them incompatible with utilitarianism.

Maximization is the view that it is desirable for the value of a state of affairs to be as great as possible. This is perhaps the least controversial of the defining characteristics of utilitarianism because there is generally thought to be little to be said for opposing views, such as the view that the value of a state of affairs should be as small as possible or the view that the value of a state of affairs is not a matter of moral significance. However, controversial or not, it is an essential component of utilitarianism.

Variations among Forms of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is effectively defined by the conjunction of the foregoing five views, but even within the conceptual space thus delimited, there are several further distinctions to be drawn among different forms of utilitarianism. The most important of these are surveyed in this section.

Different Accounts of How Facts about Well-Being Determine the Rightness and Wrongness of Acts

Different forms of utilitarianism are sometimes based on different accounts of how facts about well-being determine the rightness and wrongness of acts. Act utilitarianism is standardly understood as the view that an act is right if and only if it results in at least as much well-being as any other act that could have been

performed instead. Rule utilitarianism, in contrast, is standardly understood as the view that an act is right if and only if it would be allowed by a system of rules whose general acceptance would result in at least as much well-being as (the general acceptance of) any other system of rules. Act utilitarianism is arguably the more natural, or default, formulation, with rule utilitarianism typically being understood as initially deriving its appeal from its relative immunity to certain objections to which act utilitarianism is vulnerable (although proponents of rule utilitarianism offer further arguments in defense of it).

The most significant such objection is that act utilitarianism implies judgments, for particular cases, that are generally seen as so morally counterintuitive that they are implausible. For example, cases can be devised in which well-being would be uniquely maximized if one were to break a promise for a relatively trivial reason, to arrange for the judicial punishment of an innocent person, or to steal a lot of money from a rich person in order to distribute it to poor people. In such cases, act utilitarianism would, by hypothesis, require one to perform those acts. Because such acts are generally seen as morally objectionable even with the hypothesized maximization of well-being, act utilitarianism is vulnerable to being criticized for implying implausible judgments in such cases.

Rule utilitarianism can be understood as a response to this and other problems with act utilitarianism. Rule utilitarianism prohibits certain acts that act utilitarianism condones because not every act that would result in as much well-being as possible would be allowed by a system of rules whose general acceptance would result in as much well-being as possible. For example, the system of rules whose general acceptance would result in as much well-being as possible probably would not allow a promise to be broken for a relatively trivial reason, even if circumstances were such that the breaking of the promise were, in fact, necessary to maximize well-being. Rather, it would probably set more stringent conditions for the breaking of promises because of the desirability (in terms of well-being) of the existence, in society, of a stronger institution of promising than one in which promises are broken whenever doing so results in even slightly more well-being. Thus, rule utilitarianism is generally understood as being more reliable than act utilitarianism in requiring such things as the keeping of promises, abstaining from judicially punishing innocent people, and respecting persons' property. In this way, rule utilitarianism is less vulnerable than act utilitarianism to the charge of implying morally objectionable judgments in regard to particular cases.

Although rule utilitarianism arguably improves upon act utilitarianism in the matter of avoiding implying morally objectionable judgments, it is vulnerable to a different serious objection. This objection has to do with

cases in which rule utilitarianism prohibits an act that would result in as much well-being as possible, on the grounds that it would be prohibited by the system of rules whose general acceptance would result in as much well-being as possible. In any such case, if rule utilitarianism's ultimate purpose is the production of as much well-being as possible, then rule utilitarianism's refusal to allow the act in question lacks a clear rationale and seems to be little more than rule worship. In response to this objection, it cannot be claimed that although the act might seem to result in as much well-being as possible, this appearance is deceptive because it fails to take into account effects such as the deterioration of a valuable social institution such as that of promising. For the act in question can just be stipulated to be one that both would result in as much well-being as possible (even taking into account indirect effects such as those alleged to have been neglected) and would be prohibited by the system of rules whose general acceptance would result in as much well-being as possible. Nor can a defender of rule utilitarianism claim that the rules that would result in as much well-being as possible would actually allow all acts that would result in as much well-being as possible, for then rule utilitarianism would allow every act that act utilitarianism allows, and rule utilitarianism would largely collapse into act utilitarianism.

Act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism are not the only accounts of how facts about well-being determine the rightness and wrongness of acts. For example, a standard formulation of motive utilitarianism is that an act is right if and only if it would be prompted by a set of motives whose general currency would result in at least as much well-being as (the general currency of) any other set of motives. However, these two views are the leading accounts.

Different Accounts of Well-Being

Different accounts of well-being are another source of the differences among various forms of utilitarianism. Most forms of utilitarianism embrace one of the following theories of well-being: a hedonistic theory, a desire-satisfaction theory, or an objective list theory.

Hedonistic theories hold that well-being is based entirely on pleasure, so that one's well-being is determined by how pleasurable or enjoyable one's life is. Such theories have obvious initial plausibility because it seems that much of what people rationally want for themselves in their own lives, and rationally want for others in their lives, are pleasurable experiences (and the absence of displeasurable ones). However, these theories are also vulnerable to some serious objections. For example, they typically imply that a person who is blissfully ignorant of personal faults, failed projects, friends' betrayals, and other such bad things is just

as well off as another person whose life is spared such things, as long as the first person's felt or lived experience is just as pleasurable or enjoyable as the second person's. More generally, it is often objected against hedonistic theories that one's well-being cannot be entirely a matter of what is going on in one's head: External events and states of affairs matter, too.

These and other difficulties with hedonistic theories motivate desire-satisfaction theories. These theories hold that one's well-being is determined by the extent to which one's desires are satisfied, with more weight typically being given to desires that are especially intense or long-standing. These theories do not deny that pleasure contributes to well-being; they allow that pleasure (or pleasurable experiences) may be among the things that one desires. However, they seek to avoid the most problematic implications of hedonistic theories, such as the one mentioned previously, by pointing out that people normally desire such things as the avoidance of personal faults, the successful completion of projects, and the loyalty of friends. As a result, the first person in the example given previously would be worse off, according to most desire-satisfaction theories, than the second person, even if the two persons' felt or lived experiences were equally pleasurable. In this way, desire-satisfaction theories avoid implying that one's well-being is entirely a matter of what is going on in one's head.

Both hedonistic and desire-satisfaction theories of well-being are subjective theories: They imply that one's well-being ultimately depends on one's mental states – specifically, one's affective states (either states that determine what one finds pleasurable or states that determine what one desires). Objective list theories deny that well-being is entirely subjective in this way, maintaining that some things enhance one's well-being (and some things detract from one's well-being) regardless of one's affective states. For example, an objective list theory might maintain that certain kinds of personal relationships, or certain kinds of personal achievements, enhance one's well-being regardless of whether one finds them pleasant and regardless of whether one desires them. Just as desire-satisfaction theories try to subsume hedonistic theories by granting that pleasurable experiences can enhance well-being – all it takes is for one to desire them – objective list theories often try to subsume both hedonistic and desire-satisfaction theories by granting that pleasure (or, at least, some pleasurable experiences) and the satisfaction of desires (or, at least, the satisfaction of some desires) are objectively good for one. Thus, objective list theories are defined not by the exclusion of pleasure and desire satisfaction as sources of well-being but, rather, by the inclusion of other, nonsubjective elements. This, in turn, is the source of the strongest line of objection against such theories, which is that the inclusion of other, nonsubjective elements often seems

arbitrary or ad hoc. For example, certain kinds of personal relationships surely do contribute to well-being for most people, but it is often argued that they do so in virtue of being enjoyable or in virtue of satisfying desires, and that for people for whom this is not the case, such relationships do not actually enhance well-being. To insist otherwise, objectors say, is to insist on a kind of paternalism about well-being.

Most forms of utilitarianism embrace some form of a hedonistic, desire-satisfaction, or objective list theory of well-being. Of course, a utilitarian theory could also consistently deny all of these and hold an alternative account of well-being, as long as it maintained the welfarist commitment to regarding the goodness and badness of consequences, or states of affairs, as depending entirely on facts about well-being.

The Scope of Moral Concern

Different forms of utilitarianism, like different forms of other kinds of moral theories, are sometimes distinguished from one another by their accounts of the entities that are the objects of moral concern. (Different moral theories are also distinguished by their different accounts of what it means to be an object of moral concern. For utilitarianism, being an object of moral concern amounts to having one's well-being included in the aggregate of well-being that is to be maximized.) It follows from utilitarianism's commitment to individualism that only individuals, and not collectivities, are objects of moral concern. However, because individualism places only an upper limit on the scope of moral concern, not a lower limit, forms of utilitarianism can still vary along this dimension. The two most common positions for forms of utilitarianism to take are that all sentient creatures are objects of moral concern and that only some sentient beings, such as persons, are objects of moral concern.

The class of individuals that a utilitarian theory regards as objects of moral concern is typically dictated by its account of well-being. Specifically, a utilitarian theory tends to regard as objects of moral concern all individuals capable of having well-being. As indicated previously, most forms of utilitarianism affirm theories of well-being according to which pleasure at least contributes to an individual's well-being (regardless of whether they are hedonistic, desire-satisfaction, or objective list theories of well-being); consequently, most forms of utilitarianism regard all individuals who are capable of experiencing pleasure or pain – that is, all sentient beings – as objects of moral concern. It would be possible for a form of utilitarianism to affirm a theory of well-being implying a narrower scope of moral concern, such as a theory of well-being on which only intellectual achievements were constituents of well-being. (Then many sentient beings – those incapable of intellectual

achievements – would not be regarded as objects of moral concern.) However, because such theories of well-being are not prominent, such forms of utilitarianism are not prominent. In general, utilitarian theories tend to affirm theories of well-being on which all sentient beings are objects of moral concern.

The Aggregate Utility to Be Maximized

One final distinction to be discussed here concerns whether a form of utilitarianism is committed to the maximization of total well-being or whether it is committed to the maximization of average well-being. When the number of individuals who are objects of moral concern is constant, this distinction is moot, but when it is not, it can make a significant difference. For example, if one can perform either of two acts, and the first act will result in the existence of many individuals who are not very well off individually but who are so numerous that their total well-being is relatively large, and the second act will result in the existence of fewer individuals who are quite well off individually but who are so few that their total well-being is relatively small, a form of total utilitarianism would typically require one to perform the first act, while a form of average utilitarianism would typically require one to perform the second act.

Both total utilitarianism and average utilitarianism are generally seen as having some plausibility, but each has some implications that many people find counterintuitive. For example, total utilitarianism implies that given any state of affairs in which every individual has a certain positive level of well-being, a better state of affairs would result if one were to triple the number of individuals and make each individual's level of well-being half of what it was in the first state of affairs. If this transformation is imagined as repeated multiple times, it is clear that, in the limit, such a series of states of affairs would tend toward one in which every individual's well-being is only infinitesimally greater than zero. Many people find it counterintuitive that such a state of affairs could be better than the original one. On the other hand, average utilitarianism implies that given a state of affairs in which the individuals all have levels of well-being that are not all equal to each other but are all quite satisfactory and have a high average, a better state of affairs would result if one were to eliminate an individual whose level of well-being is slightly below the preexisting average, even though (as stipulated) that individual's level of well-being is quite satisfactory. Because of examples such as these, neither total utilitarianism nor average utilitarianism is generally regarded as plausible in all cases. However, because many moral problems do not involve changes in the number of individuals concerned, total utilitarianism and average utilitarianism give the same verdict in many cases, enabling many moral problems to be addressed without

settling the question of which of these two views is more plausible.

Objections to Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a controversial ethical theory, and many objections have been lodged against it. Following are brief accounts of three of the most important of these objections. These three objections are first discussed with reference to act utilitarianism because their force against other forms of utilitarianism, such as rule utilitarianism, is different and somewhat more complicated. Their bearing on rule utilitarianism is discussed subsequently.

One major objection to act utilitarianism is that it does not adequately respect individual rights, such as the right to life, the right to liberty, or the right to be treated fairly in a judicial or other potentially coercive proceeding. To say that one has a right to something generally means that one has a very strong *prima facie* claim to have that thing provided to one (or, at least, to be left unimpeded in one's pursuit or enjoyment of that thing). This does not mean that one's claim is so strong as to be altogether overriding; even the staunchest advocates of individual rights tend to allow that such claims can legitimately be overridden in extreme cases. But to say that one has a right to something does generally mean that one's claim to that thing cannot legitimately be overridden simply by the fact that slightly more well-being would result if one's claim were, indeed, overridden. However, act utilitarianism is committed to the claim that it is legitimate to violate a person's rights whenever doing so would, indeed, result in more well-being. Consequently, act utilitarianism is vulnerable to being charged with failing to adequately respect individual rights.

A second major objection to act utilitarianism is that it does not give adequate weight to what can be thought of as backward-looking reasons. These are reasons that regard some prior event as partially or wholly determining what it is right for one to do in the future. For example, the fact that one has made a promise to someone is often regarded as making it morally required (absent special circumstances) that one act in the manner in which one promised to act. Similarly, the fact that one has been treated with generosity by someone in the past is often regarded as making it morally required (again, absent special circumstances) that one reciprocate that generosity, at least to a certain extent. However, act utilitarianism is entirely forward looking: It says that what one is required to do is entirely determined by facts about the consequences of one's possible acts. Thus, act utilitarianism is not able to account straightforwardly for what many people perceive to be the genuine moral force of backward-looking reasons.

A third major objection to act utilitarianism is that it is excessively demanding, in virtue of apparently imposing

on people moral obligations that are much more stringent than many people think are reasonable. For example, act utilitarianism implies that if one person has resources that would enhance another person's well-being more than the loss of them would detract from the first person's well-being, then the first person is morally obligated to give those resources to the second person (or to someone whose well-being would be even more enhanced by those resources). In general, act utilitarianism implies that one is obligated to make any sacrifice, no matter how great, if the benefits to others would outweigh the cost to oneself. Many people think, however, that although everyone is obligated to help others to a certain extent, no one is obligated to regard others' well-being as having the same importance as one's own. Because of this, act utilitarianism is often criticized for being excessively demanding.

Defenders of act utilitarianism offer replies to these and other objections, but some theorists highlight the fact that rule utilitarianism is less vulnerable to these objections because it can plausibly be claimed that the system of rules whose general acceptance would result in as much well-being as possible would include rules respecting the foregoing concerns about rights, backward-looking reasons, and demandingness. For example, it can plausibly be claimed, with regard to many of the most important rights that rights theorists defend, that the system of rules whose general acceptance would result in as much well-being as possible would include rules requiring that those rights be accorded the protected status that rights theorists urge for them. Second, it can plausibly be claimed that the rule-utilitarian system of rules would include rules requiring that moral weight be given to backward-looking reasons. Third, it can plausibly be claimed that the rule-utilitarian system of rules would not be extremely demanding because of the high costs that would be involved in causing extremely demanding rules to be generally accepted. Despite rule utilitarianism's diminished initial vulnerability to these objections, two concerns linger. First, rule utilitarianism is vulnerable to the charge that it makes the status of rights, backward-looking reasons, and the avoidance of overly demanding moral requirements too contingent on empirical calculations about what system of rules would result in as much well-being as possible. Second, rule utilitarianism remains vulnerable to the charge, mentioned previously, that it is incoherent to have a system of rules prescribing conduct that does not result in as much well-being as possible when the avowed purpose of the system of rules is to maximize well-being.

Applications

Applied ethics has been strongly influenced by utilitarianism, especially with regard to the status of women, the status of animals, and distributive justice. With regard to the status of women, most societies throughout history

have treated women less favorably than men: Through combinations of laws and customs, they have limited women's rights to own property, restricted their opportunities to engage in business and to pursue careers of their choosing, and made them subordinate to men in marriage (to name just three major areas of unequal treatment). Most forms of utilitarianism, however, deny the moral legitimacy of such states of affairs. The primary utilitarian argument is simple: Even granting that men would be harmed, overall, if the rights of women were made equal to those of men, women would almost certainly be benefited, overall, even more than men would be harmed. Therefore, making the rights of women equal to those of men would almost certainly result in greater overall well-being. This was a key part of the argument of John Stuart Mill in his influential 1869 work *The Subjection of Women*.

With regard to the status of animals, most societies throughout history have also treated (nonhuman) animals less favorably than humans. Hunting animals for sport and using them in scientific research are examples of such treatment that have been vivid in the public consciousness at times, but by far the greatest source of avoidable animal suffering, and one that is gaining prominence in the public consciousness, is the food-production industry. Most of the animal products that humans eat are produced in circumstances that are extremely painful for the animals because they include such things as uncomfortably crowded pens and diets that make the animals more suitable as food sources but compromise their health and quality of life. Most forms of utilitarianism, however, deny the moral legitimacy of this situation. Like the primary utilitarian argument bearing on the unequal status of women, the primary utilitarian argument bearing on this issue is simple: Even granting that humans would be harmed, overall, if such practices were eliminated, animals would almost certainly be benefited, overall, even more than humans would be harmed. Therefore, eliminating such practices would almost certainly result in greater overall well-being.

Not all forms of utilitarianism that urge the elimination of such practices imply that humans should stop eating animal products altogether. Some do imply this, but some imply the weaker conclusion that humans should restrict their consumption of animal products to ones that have been produced in humane circumstances, in which the animals in question lead reasonably pleasant lives until they are killed for food production. The divergence between these two subsets of animal-friendly forms of utilitarianism stems, for the most part, from their divergent views concerning how harmful it is for one to have one's life cut short. Some such forms of utilitarianism imply that that is so harmful that all food-production practices that involve killing animals are immoral, whereas others imply that (as long as the animals' circumstances are reasonably pleasant while they are alive) the

harm suffered by animals, as a result of premature death, can be less than the benefits, to humans, of the resulting food products. The former forms of utilitarianism effectively require vegetarianism, whereas the latter grant the moral permissibility of some carnivorous diets.

The third area of applied ethics in which utilitarianism has been especially influential is distributive justice, especially the issue of poverty relief. As noted previously (in the discussion of the objection that utilitarianism is too demanding), utilitarianism implies that if one person has resources that would benefit another person more than the loss of them would harm the first person, then the first person is morally obligated to give those resources to the second person (or to someone who would be benefited even more by those resources). Of course, in order to apply this judgment to specific cases, it is necessary to have some account of the extent to which different persons would be benefited by certain resources (or harmed by the absence of them). It is generally thought that no such account can be formulated with great rigor because such benefits and harms are typically thought to depend in part on pleasure and displeasure, and it is impossible for any one person to experience the pleasure of one person (e.g., the recipient of a good) and the displeasure of another (e.g., the former possessor of that good) and arrive at the judgment that the former person's pleasure is greater than the latter person's displeasure. (This theoretical difficulty also impinges on the issues of the status of women and the status of animals, but it is generally thought to be less pressing, practically, in such contexts because the benefits and harms in such contexts are generally thought to be of such disparate magnitudes.)

Despite this difficulty, a rough account of the extent to which different persons would be benefited by certain resources (or harmed by the absence of them) can be based on the principle of diminishing marginal utility – the principle that, on average, the more of some resource one has, the less one's well-being is affected by a change, of a given magnitude, in one's supply of that resource. For example, on average, a rich person would be less affected by the gain or loss of \$1,000 than a poor person would be. On the basis of this principle, and given existing interpersonal and international inequalities, most forms of

utilitarianism have highly redistributive implications for poverty relief: They imply that rich people should give much more money to charity than they currently do, and that rich countries' foreign-aid budgets should be much larger than they currently are. As noted previously, Peter Singer has been a leading utilitarian voice in regard to both the status of animals and distributive justice.

See also: Animal Rights; Consequentialism and Deontology; Distributive Justice, Theories of; Hedonism; Painism; Paternalism; Poverty; Sex Equality; Theories of Ethics, Overview.

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Biographical Sketch

Ben Eggleston is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Kansas. He received a bachelor's degree from Washington and Lee University in political philosophy and mathematics. He attended graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh, where he received master's degrees in philosophy and economics and a doctorate in philosophy. His areas of specialization are ethics, political philosophy, and rational choice theory.