

**WHAT UTILITARIANISM IS NOT.** utilitarianism is defined as the view, on which an action is ‘objectively right’ if, under the given circumstances, will produce the greatest happiness among ‘all’ that are involved. 411

Before clarifying it further, Sidgwick contrasts utilitarianism with egoistic hedonism. The long story short, utilitarianism does not claim that you have a duty to increase your own happiness. Nor does it assume that you psychologically can’t fail to seek your own happiness. 412

Similarly, utilitarianism is not a view on which you are always *motivated* to search the general welfare. Motives can be as diverse as you like. The doctrine of utilitarianism contains claims about the value of the action’s goals. Indeed, if these goals are attained more effectively by selfish motives (say), then these motives are to be preferred. 413

**WHAT UTILITARIANISM IS.** We assume, first, that happiness may be aggregated. That is, we may compare the pleasure and pain yielded by individual actions. Second, we say ‘all’, but who is included, exactly? Should we include humans only or all ‘sentient beings’ capable of experiencing pleasures and pains? On the face of it, the former view is arbitrarily speciest: why should we ignore all species other than the humans? 413 414

But suppose that we are only concerned with humans. Here Sidgwick raises an influential concern: how far should we be concerned, in our decisions and actions, with the welfare of *future generations*? Common experience teaches us that human life, for the majority of humans, is dominated by pleasure over pain? For otherwise we wouldn’t have been deterred by death. 414ff 415

This reason, incidentally, I find not quite convincing. It may be that my life is dominated by pain, but that there is a certain instinct (a law of nature, as Kant said) that prevents me from committing suicide right away. Or it may be that I am hoping that my life, painful as it may be, will contribute to the well-being of the lives of my loved ones.

In any case, if the future generations have a degree of happiness, on average, lower than we do, then a paradox emerges. We are urged to multiply more and more, while people, on average, get less and less happy. Utilitarianism, apparently, has no answer to this problem, so far as its concern is to increase happiness overall. 415

Sidgwick concludes by noting that the distribution of happiness may have to obey some principles of fairness. And how do we use utilitarianism to justify these principles? If these principles are independent of the principle of utility, then the utilitarian project to base ethics on utility fails. I suspect that the utilitarian will tell us to look at the utility distribution as part of a temporal process. We should prefer to distribute equally, fairly, or impartially, since this policy would yield more utility in the longer term. 416

**THE PROOF OF UTILITARIANISM.** The question of ‘proof’ is a question of conviction: we need to have a reason to accept utilitarianism, even if we can’t have a rigorous, logical proof. One way to be convinced is to see that alternative views fail. 418

If the opponent is a rational egoist, then we might ask: why should we do anything now to benefit our future? For it may be that our present concerns, and our present self as a whole, do not stand in any intrinsic relation to the future self. If the self is a collection of experiences, rather than a substance, there may not be unity between what we want now and what we want later—simply because there is no ‘we’ to speak of. To press this line of argument, we may say that the same distinction holds between the concern for ‘my’ interests and the concern for the interests of another individual. That is, so far as I am prepared to care about my future, I should also be prepared to care about other individuals. 419

Sidgwick does not press this argument further. Instead, he asks whether, in general, the principle of utility should take priority over other intuitively valid moral principles. The utilitarian must show that various moral principles that we accept as valid are in conflict with each other or that they are too imprecise, and that the principle of utility can resolve these difficulties. He must also show that no other resolution is possible. 420 421

**PRIMARY AND SECONDARY PRINCIPLES.** As was admitted by the utilitarians themselves, a direct calculation of pleasure and pains to determine your every action is fraught with difficulties. Simply put, there is no reliable method of calculation. Sidgwick here discusses the idea, first suggested by Mill, that the familiar moral precepts (the ‘Common Sense’ morality, ‘secondary’ principles) may be used as rules of thumb to assist the utilitarian agent in his moral decisions. It is, for example, neither necessary, nor advisable, to begin calculating whether a particular act of theft could yield good consequences. Under normal conditions, we are expected to follow the rule that theft is wrong. We appeal to the primary principle (the principle of utility) to arbitrate in controversial circumstances, where, typically, various secondary principles clash (e.g., stealing for the sake of saving lives). 460

Sidgwick sketches the concrete ways in which common morality could have developed. He notes, however, that they might not withstand rational scrutiny and might, therefore, lack any rational justification. Indeed, there are reasons to think that certain rules that at one point yielded high utility for a given community, but at another later point would still be adopted although their utility value is low. 462 463

Among these reasons let's mention two. People might not have a sufficiently wide circle of sympathy. They might adopt rules that favour one narrow group at the expense of another group. The resulting policies would clash with the principle of utility. Secondly, certain principles, useful before, could be preserved despite the changing circumstances and, therefore, changing utilitarian calculations. As early anthropologists called them, they would be 'survivals' of the earlier practices. Utilitarianism provides us with no reason for challenging these antiquated precepts in the absence of some other conflicting precepts. 464 465

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