

6AANA099 UTILITARIANISM

Syllabus – Academic year 2014/2015

Basic information

Credits: 15

Module Tutor: David Galloway

Office: Philosophy Building 803

Consultation time: Wednesday 15.00 to 17.00

Semester: Semester 1

Lecture time and venue: Thursday 14.00 to 15.00, Strand 2.23

Module description (plus aims and objectives)

This module provides a critical examination of the broad Utilitarian tradition, focussing on three major historical figures—Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Henry Sidgwick. It explores the way that Utilitarianism has developed over the last three hundred years, and some of the variety that is possible within the broad Utilitarian framework. But we will also examine a good deal of work by contemporary thinkers such as Bernard Williams, Peter Singer and Derek Parfit.

The module also aims to impart a critical perspective on several key elements of moral theory as they have featured in the Utilitarian tradition, including hedonism, consequentialism, impartiality, rights and justice, moral ‘intuitions’ and moral theory, rationality and maximising, and moral motivation.

WARNING: You cannot read very far in the Utilitarian literature without coming across views that will surprise you, and some of these surprising views may very well give profound offence. If you think you are likely to have difficulty maintaining your composure when faced with such views, this module may not be for you.

Assessment methods and deadlines

Formative assessment: two 1500 word essays and a tutorial presentation. The first formative essay is due by 5pm, Friday 31st October, and the second by 5pm, Friday 12th December. *Formative essays must be completed by the deadline in order to receive feedback. This feedback is crucial for your summative assessment. Formative essay titles will be circulated separately via Keats.*

Summative assessment: one 2-hour examination in the May/June exam period.

Outline of lecture topics (plus some readings)

In general, *only the principal readings are given here. More detailed and extensive readings for the various components of the module will be made available separately, on the Keats system. Most of the readings can be accessed on line, and the library has copies of everything.*

Week One: Overview, and Bentham

A review of the main features of Utilitarian ethical theorizing, and their motivations, followed by a first look at Bentham.

Reading:

Colin Heydt, ‘Utilitarianism before Bentham’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism* (Cambridge: CUP 2014)

Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Preface and Chapters 1-5.

(There are many acceptable published editions of this classic text, but it is also available free on line at

<http://www.utilitarianism.com/jeremy-bentham/index.html>.)

Week Two: Utility

A Utilitarian does not have to be a hedonist, but the classical Utilitarians all were. So for them, Utility is pleasure (and the absence of pain). We take a preliminary look at some strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

Reading:

Jeremy Bentham, op. cit.

Hedonism has a long history. There is a helpful review, together with an overview of recent debates, in the IEP:

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/hedonism/>

Week Three: Acts, rules, motives, character etc.

The Principle of Utility, as we find it in Bentham, Mill and Sidgwick, speaks of right acts. Later Utilitarians, though, often speak of right rules for action. Later still, Utilitarians have wanted to focus on the right kind of character, or the right kinds of motives.

Reading:

The classic recent discussion of these issues is

Peter Railton, 'How thinking about character and Utilitarianism might lead to rethinking the character of Utilitarianism'

which is available on line.

Some further reading

The locus classicus for the distinction between act and rule Utilitarianism is

Urmson, J.O. (1953) 'The Interpretation of the Moral Philosophy of J.S. Mill' in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol III (1953), pp.33-39

The locus classicus for the view that rule utilitarianism collapses into act Utilitarianism is:

David Lyons, *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism* (Oxford: OUP 1965)

Week Four: Mill 1: Higher and lower quality pleasures

Mill tries to agree with Bentham's claim that utility is pleasure. But his theory of pleasure is in fact profoundly different.

Reading:

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapters 2 and 3 (any edition, but once again the text is available free on line at <http://www.utilitarianism.com/mill1.htm>).

Week Five: Mill 2: the 'Proof' of the Principle of Utility

Mill's 'proof' of the Principle of Utility is notorious, and has been subject to apparently devastating objections. But it is quite plausible as far as it goes—it just doesn't go far enough.

Reading:

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 4.

Week Six: Mill 3: Justice and Rights

Many would have us believe that Utilitarians cannot give proper weight to rights and justice. But Mill's attempt to do so has many merits.

Reading:

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 5, and *On Liberty* (free on line at <http://www.utilitarianism.com/ol/one.html>).

Week Seven: Sidgwick on Utilitarianism

It is in Sidgwick that Utilitarianism appears as an ethical theory in the modern sense.

Reading:

Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, Book 1 chapters 1 and 6-9.

Currently, no fully satisfactory, inexpensive edition of the *Methods* is available. The Hackett reprint is probably the best one can do. However, the text of the *Methods* (the Fifth Edition) can also be found on line, for example at <http://www.archive.org/stream/methodsethics07sidggoog#page/n22/mode/2up>.

Week Eight: Sidgwick, Utilitarianism and egoism

How do we get from individual welfare to the general good? We saw that Mill has very little to say about this. Sidgwick is the first philosopher to see the depth of the problem—and he thinks it is unsolvable.

Reading:

Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, Book 4.

Week Nine: Integrity etc.

Bernard Williams argues that Utilitarianism cannot give a plausible account of the moral importance of character traits such as integrity.

Reading

Bernard Williams, 'A critique of Utilitarianism', in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: CUP 1973)

Week Ten (10th December 2012): Ethical theory?

Some of Williams' objections to Utilitarianism would seem to be equally effective against any kind of ethical theory.

Reading:

Susan Woolf, 'Moral saints', *Journal of Philosophy* 79 no 8 (1982) 419-439

Jonathan Bennett, 'The conscience of Huckleberry Finn', *Philosophy* 49 (1974) 123-134