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Foreword

Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer

This introduction to utilitarianism appears at a propitious moment. Utilitarians have long strived to bring about practical changes to promote happiness and relieve suffering, criticizing practices that most people accepted as natural and inevitable conditions of human existence. Yet, not since the Philosophical Radicals, inspired by Jeremy Bentham, campaigned to extend voting rights and reform prisons in the early nineteenth century has utilitarianism attracted as much public attention as it does today. Nor has it ever been as prominent in discussions of ethics among teachers and researchers of philosophy.

Even in its nineteenth-century heyday, however, utilitarianism was widely ridiculed, and the reforms urged by leading utilitarians were vehemently opposed. Conservative defenders of the status quo succeeded in delaying, for several decades, reforms such as votes for women, the legalization of same-sex relationships, medical aid in dying, and laws to adequately protect the welfare of animals. In many countries, that opposition continues to block reforms that would reduce suffering. Nevertheless, thinking that is broadly utilitarian, even if not explicitly so, is having greater worldwide impact than it has ever had before.

That impact became apparent when the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world in 2020. Governments almost everywhere, faced with a new virus for which there was initially no vaccine, instituted lockdowns—depriving their citizens of the rights to freedom of movement and freedom of association. Did the citizens rise up, proclaiming that these rights are sacrosanct and not to be overridden by the goal of achieving the most well-being for all? No. Overwhelmingly, they accepted and supported suppressing these rights for the greater good. They may not have conceived of this greater good as sweepingly as utilitarians do—concerns for their own good or the good of their parents, children, or other loved ones may have moved them—but their governments usually did profess to be acting for the greater good of the community as a whole. That was true even of the United States, a country that began with a declaration of a supposedly self-evident and

unalienable right to liberty. When it came to the crunch, rights yielded to the calculus of what government action would bring about the greatest benefit based on the best available evidence in that situation of uncertainty. This is exactly what utilitarians would do.

Several other twenty-first-century changes in ethical thinking and practice, consistent with utilitarian views, have overcome the opposition of institutions that follow inflexible non-utilitarian ethical doctrines, especially hardline religious teachings. During the past two or three decades, we have seen major shifts in public morality on issues like same-sex relationships. In several countries, these shifts culminated in the legalization of homosexual marriage and voluntary euthanasia or medically assisted dying, allowing the terminally ill to die peacefully at a time of their own choosing, without further suffering. The movement to protect animals from suffering has also gained strength and, as utilitarians would urge, is increasingly—though still insufficiently—focused on reducing the vast quantity of suffering we inflict on billions of intensively confined chickens, pigs, and fish rather than on the much smaller number of abused dogs and cats.

The newest and perhaps most promising example of the influence of utilitarian thinking is the effective altruism movement, which began in the first decade of the present century. It is a social movement and a philosophical outlook that emphasizes doing the most good we can, with the resources we have available, for all sentient beings, whether they are close at hand or on the other side of the planet, and whether they are living now or are yet to be conceived. While effective altruism and utilitarianism are different in important respects—the former being more ecumenical and making fewer controversial assumptions than the latter—the effective altruism movement takes seriously and seeks to implement key utilitarian principles, like beneficence, impartiality, welfarism, and aggregation.

Utilitarianism, then, is an ethical view whose time has come with the opportunity to do far more good than it has ever done. It pushes us to examine the boundaries of our moral thinking and consider the interests of those who we often leave out of our concern—such as the global poor, non-human animals, and future generations.

Yet, utilitarianism remains contested. To make up our minds about it, we need to start by stating clearly what it is, examining its main varieties, and considering the reasons for holding or rejecting these varieties. This is the purpose of

the book you are now reading. It discusses, thoughtfully and clearly, what makes utilitarianism distinctive from other ethical theories, alongside key questions like *What even is the “well-being” that utilitarians seek to promote? How demanding is utilitarianism? How should we think about actions affecting future generations, such as having children? How much does utilitarianism diverge from commonsense morality?* And many more.

Before we conclude, we want to mention two unusual aspects of this work. The first is that it is written by three authors who partially disagree about which is the best moral theory. There can be many theoretical disagreements, even among those sympathetic to utilitarianism. Richard Yetter Chappell—like the classical utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and Henry Sidgwick—subscribes to consequentialism, the view that the right action is the one that has the best consequences. He parts from that trio, however, in rejecting hedonism, the view that the only intrinsic good to be promoted is happiness. Will MacAskill, on the other hand, thinks that hedonism offers the most plausible account of which consequences matter but has doubts about whether the right action is always the one that has the best consequences. We will put our cards on the table too: we are consequentialists and hedonists, so we differ from both Chappell and MacAskill and agree with the classical utilitarians—especially with Sidgwick, whose book *The Methods of Ethics* we rank as possibly the best ever written on ethics.¹

Despite these theoretical disagreements, we all largely agree on the implications of utilitarianism in practice, for what it means to live an ethical life. This is the unusual feature of this book that we like best: it does not treat utilitarianism only as a theory, as so many books on ethics treat the ideas they present, but also as a live option for each of us to choose as a philosophy that guides our life. The presence of a chapter on what it is like to live as a utilitarian indicates something uniquely important about ethics but often neglected. Studying ethics can change your life.

1. We explain why we think this in Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Preface

Utilitarianism is taught in introductory ethics classes around the world. But textbook presentations of utilitarianism often misconstrue the theory, failing to present either the strongest arguments in favor of it or its most sophisticated defenses against objections. They also fail to present utilitarianism's distinctive practical contributions: showing what a life lived in accordance with utilitarian ideals would really look like.

To help rectify this situation, we've written this textbook aiming to present utilitarianism in a clear and broadly sympathetic light. Ethics remains controversial, of course, and we certainly don't expect all readers to agree that utilitarianism is ultimately correct. But we hope to convey a better sense of why one might reasonably find it appealing and how it can address objections that you might otherwise have assumed were devastating.

We also discuss at length the real-life practical implications of utilitarian moral theory. Throughout the text, we emphasize the utilitarian case for striving to make the world a better place as effectively as possible while respecting commonsense norms against harming others.

The most practically important features of utilitarianism are its *impartial beneficence* and its focus on *effectiveness*. No other widely held moral view so emphasizes the importance of helping others, regardless of what groups they belong to or how they relate to the agent. As Chapter 6 (Utilitarianism and Practical Ethics) emphasizes, utilitarianism expands our moral circle of concern. Not only does it condemn racism, sexism, and other discrimination already widely condemned today, but it also equally values the well-being even of people in faraway countries, of non-human animals, and of future generations. And, as Chapter 7 (Acting on Utilitarianism) explains, utilitarianism directs us to *prioritize* our efforts and resources to do more good rather than less. Utilitarianism thus naturally supports *effective altruism*: the project of finding the best ways to help others and acting accordingly. This may include focusing on global rather than local poverty (as money goes further in the poorest countries, making a bigger difference to its beneficiaries), on relieving the suffering of factory-farmed animals (which is both

immense in scale and significantly tractable), and on anticipating and addressing global catastrophic risks, which threaten the existence of all future generations. We may most effectively contribute to these causes via our charitable donations, career choice, or outreach that encourages others to join the effort.

One needn't accept utilitarianism in order to agree with these practical implications. Chapter 8 (Near-Utilitarian Alternatives) explores possible departures from utilitarianism, assessing which ones do or do not threaten its beneficent practical implications. Indeed, all three authors of this text are personally much more confident of the merits of doing good effectively than we are in utilitarianism as a moral theory.

Chapter 2 (Elements and Types of Utilitarianism) introduces the crucial distinction between using utilitarianism as a *criterion* for moral assessments versus using it as a *decision procedure* to directly guide our actions in practice. Many objections to utilitarianism rest on mistakenly believing that utilitarians use the theory not only as a criterion but also as a decision procedure. However, as we further emphasize in Chapter 6, utilitarians reject making every decision on the basis of a naive utilitarian calculus. This fact substantially weakens several of the objections discussed in Part II, including the concern that utilitarianism recommends wicked-seeming actions whenever the agent believes them likely to do more good than harm. Instead, utilitarian goals may be best achieved by following reliable rules and heuristics (such as commonsense moral virtues and respect for individual rights). So, we believe that utilitarians, in practice, should aspire to live in accordance with virtues like integrity, trustworthiness, and law-abidingness, as well as avoiding harming others unless under the most extreme circumstances.

While we are all broadly sympathetic to utilitarianism, our precise attitudes vary. For example, Richard outright rejects the hedonism of classical utilitarianism and is undecided about the extent to which desert-adjustments and partiality toward our loved ones may be intrinsically warranted. But he's very confident that some form of consequentialism is correct and most likely one that at least roughly approximates utilitarianism in important cases.

In contrast, Will thinks that classical utilitarianism is the most plausible version of utilitarianism. However, he's not very confident in utilitarianism itself: he puts significant credence on non-consequentialist moral views, too, and thinks it's likely that we haven't yet even conceived of the correct moral theory. He takes

this *moral uncertainty* to further bolster the practical case for deontic constraints against violating rights and for making further inquiry into ethics a moral priority.

As philosophers, we would not wish for our readers to leave this text with the impression that utilitarianism is unassailable or obviously correct. We think the theory has a lot going for it, and we've tried to bring that out. But, like any philosophical view, it also faces serious challenges and objections. We encourage readers to critically assess our arguments, and reflect for themselves upon what they think ultimately matters and how best to live and act in light of those reflections.

A note on the source material



This textbook is adapted from material we have published online at **utilitarianism.net**. The web edition contains supplemental resources that may be of interest to readers, including audio narrations, a glossary of key terms, biographies of key thinkers, and guest essays by leading academics on specific topics relating to utilitarianism. We're grateful to Hackett Publishing for working with us to produce this convenient book edition while the web edition remains, as always, free and open access. All author royalties from this book will be donated to charity.

Author contributions

Authors are listed in order of contribution, with chapter-specific details available on the web edition (as not all authors contributed to the writing of all chapters).

—Richard Yetter Chappell,
Darius Meissner,
and William MacAskill