

# Taking Utilitarianism Seriously

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## Chapter Abstracts

### 1. Introduction

Utilitarianism is defined as a family of views united by acceptance of three doctrines. Consequentialism is the view that moral phenomena can be explained by their relationship to goodness; welfarism is the view that all and only well-being has noninstrumental value; and sum-ranking is the view that the value of an outcome is the sum of the goods and bads it contains. This chapter notes that each of these claims is plausible taken by itself, and that objections to utilitarianism are usually prompted by its implications about cases. It also explains the method and organization of the rest of the book.

### 2. Six Objections

This chapter identifies and discusses six powerful objections to utilitarianism. These are that it has an inadequate account of value, that it countenances abhorrent actions, that it is too demanding, that it fails to recognise the separateness of persons, that it does not recognise the distinctiveness of political issues as compared with moral issues, and that it has a deficient account of decision making and virtue. Each objection is analysed and its application to different forms of utilitarianism is noted. The test for whether we should take utilitarianism seriously will be whether it can answer these objections.

### 3. Basic Ideas

The version of utilitarianism developed in the book seeks to explain the rightness of actions in terms of the normative reasons for and against actions. This chapter explains some background assumptions about reasons, rightness, their relationship to each other, and their relationship to good deliberation and praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. It canvasses several possible views of these relationships, but argues that reasons and rightness are to be understood in a non-perspectival way, while deliberation, praiseworthiness, and blameworthiness are perspectival matters and not closely connected to reasons or rightness. The chapter ends by noting the variety of possible utilitarian theories of reasons and some issues facing such theories.

### 4. Well-Being

Utilitarians have ample reason for wanting to know the nature of well-being. The central issue in this debate is whether some form of subjectivism is true. However, this chapter claims that the arguments for and against subjectivism are currently in stalemate, and that we should remain agnostic about the nature of well-being. Yet we can still make progress in thinking about well-

being and how to promote it by considering how we can know whether something would be good for someone. In particular, the chapter argues that we should use Peter Railton's idea of alienation for epistemic purposes. It then discusses how best to formulate the alienation test in light of false beliefs and subjects' changing values. It concludes that decreasing the cost and difficulty of trying things may improve our capacity to promote our own and others' well-being.

## 5. Two Kinds of Reason

One kind of reason for action is that the action would have a good outcome. According to Act Consequentialism all reasons are like this. However, these 'act-based' reasons may be contrasted with 'pattern-based' reasons, which flow from the fact that an action is part of some good pattern of action. This chapter argues that both kinds of reasons exist, and explores some of the issues facing any theory of pattern-based reasons. One such issue is whether they can exist in cases where the valuable pattern would not be realised because other agents are unwilling to play their parts. According to idealising forms of Rule Consequentialism, they can. However, the chapter endorses an argument made by Alexander Dietz that this is incompatible with any plausible account of the strength of pattern-based reasons. It ends by explaining how pattern-based reasons may nevertheless retain their practical significance.

## 6. Moral Rights

The concept of moral rights is prominent in much ethical and political thought. This chapter argues that utilitarians can and should give an account of the existence of moral rights. It surveys existing utilitarian accounts of rights, before developing a novel indirect theory of them. According to this theory, rights are structures of reasons and abilities to change reasons. These reasons are pattern-based reasons to participate in beneficial patterns of behaviour and motivation. If we can explain moral rights in this way, we can explain one important kind of moral constraint, such as the constraint against torture, and we can also explain the distinction between acting wrongly and wronging someone. The chapter ends by discussing whether rights are, on this view, too contingent on facts.

## 7. Justice and Equality

Utilitarianism is often thought to be insufficiently egalitarian, and to lack a plausible theory of distributive justice. This chapter discusses these objections. It begins by discussing the inadequacy of some simple utilitarian theories of justice, before arguing that utilitarians should treat justice as exhausted by respect for moral rights. This view captures the importance of some kinds of equality, but not all. The chapter then discusses the importance of substantive equality, focusing on cases of known expensive needs. It notes that our intuitions about these cases reflect a distinction between causes of the expense, and argues that utilitarianism can provide a better account of this than is provided by egalitarian views. The result is a theory according to which substantive equality is a matter of good social policy rather than a requirement of distributive justice.

## 8. Legitimacy and Democracy

Much contemporary political philosophy emphasises the distinctiveness of political issues from moral issues. In contrast, utilitarianism seems to treat political issues as a mere subset of moral issues. It also seems to fit a technocratic model of politics, according to which political decisions should be left to experts capable of assessing the relevant facts. This chapter argues that utilitarians can give a richer account of politics, and one that is less technocratic, by attending to the normative significance of legitimacy. It outlines a conception of legitimacy as the degree of acceptance of a procedure. Though this is a sociological property and not a normative one, it has considerable normative significance: it describes the limits of what can be achieved without coercion or disorder. Moreover, since democracy is now, in many contexts, a necessary condition of legitimacy, the account of legitimacy bolsters the utilitarian case for supporting democracy.

## 9. Virtuous Agents

Chapter 3 claimed that reasons and rightness are non-perspectival. This means that they depend on facts about the whole future, and raises a puzzle about how to characterise virtuous agents. Agents cannot know which of their options is right, or any but a small proportion of their reasons for action. This chapter argues that we can account for the features of virtuous agency without having to introduce parallel perspectival concepts of reasons and rightness. It begins by characterising good decision procedures as those which tend to result in right action. Despite our ‘cluelessness’ about token actions, we can form reasonable beliefs about the total consequences of decision procedures. It then presents a novel account of praiseworthiness, using the idea of beneficial practices of praising. Finally, it claims that virtues are traits that both tend to cause right action and are praiseworthy. Virtues are not just good, but also admirable.

## 10. Conclusion

Utilitarianism is animated by a very attractive idea: that what matters ultimately is that people have good lives. This chapter explains how the version of utilitarianism presented in this book can give plausible answers to the six objections identified in Chapter 2. By developing utilitarianism at length and adding some complexity to its structure, we can show that it is worth taking seriously. This may encourage others to contribute to the further development of the utilitarian tradition.