Act-utilitarianism (sometimes called “direct” or “extreme” utilitarianism) is a normative ethical theory—the first such theory we have discussed. Before act-utilitarianism can be evaluated, it must be formulated correctly. Fred Feldman\(^2\) begins with a crude formulation of the theory and then refines it repeatedly until it no longer succumbs to counterexamples. He does this, in part, to show his readers how philosophers proceed. The point of this handout is simply to list the various formulations of the theory, together with Feldman’s counterexamples to (or criticisms of) each.

Here are the nine formulations:

**U\(_1\): An act is right if and only if it promotes happiness.** \(^3\) There is no counterexample to this formulation. The problem is that it’s vague. It gets replaced by the following:

**U\(_2\): An act is right if and only if it causes pleasure and the absence of pain.** No act causes the absence of pain, so this formulation implies that no act is right; but surely some acts are right!

**U\(_3\): An act is right if and only if it causes pleasure and does not cause pain.** There are two counterexamples to this formulation: first, some right acts cause pain (the rattlesnake case); second, some wrong acts cause pleasure and do not cause pain (the fossil case).

**U\(_4\): An act is right if and only if its utility is greater than zero.** There are two counterexamples to this formulation: first, some right acts do not have utility greater than zero (because all choices inflict pain, for example); second, some wrong acts have utility greater than zero (the fossil case again).

**U\(_5\): An act is right if and only if its utility is very high.** There are two counterexamples to this formulation: first, some right acts do not have very high utility (the rattlesnake case again); second, some wrong acts have very high utility (perhaps the fossil case again).

**U\(_6\): An act is right if and only if its utility is higher than the utility of any other act the agent could have done instead.** In cases in which two or more acts tie for highest utility (e.g., the twin case), neither act would be right; but surely it would be right to perform one of them!

**U\(_7\): An act is right if and only if there is no other act the agent could have done instead that has higher utility than it has.** Feldman says that this “is perhaps the most plausible and widely

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1 Rule-utilitarianism is sometimes called “indirect” or “restricted” utilitarianism.
3 This says that promoting happiness is both necessary and sufficient for an act’s being right. If either of these claims is false, i.e., if promoting happiness is not necessary for an act’s being right or if promoting happiness is not sufficient for an act’s being right, then the statement as a whole is false. There are always two types of counterexample to an “if and only if” statement. The first type counters the claim of necessity; the second type counters the claim of sufficiency.
considered form of utilitarianism known." This is not to say that it’s correct, only that it does not succumb to obvious counterexamples, as the others do. It may yet turn out to be unacceptable.

**U₈:** An act is right if and only if it produces the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This is a defective formulation. It requires that two independent variables—the greatest happiness and the greatest number of happy people—be maximized, which may not be possible.

**U₉:** An act is right if and only if it causes more pleasure and less pain than any other act the agent could have done instead. There may be no act that both causes more pleasure and causes less pain than any other, in which case there is no right act; but surely there is a right act!\(^5\)

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4 Feldman, 26.
5 See ibid., 28, for an example.