Direct Utilitarianism (DU):¹ For all acts x, x is right iff x maximizes net utility.²

Commentary: According to this theory, (1) if an act maximizes net utility, then it is right, and (2) if an act does not maximize net utility, then it is not right (i.e., it is wrong).

Net utility is calculated by subtracting disutility (e.g., pain or unhappiness) from utility (e.g., pleasure or happiness). For example, if a particular act produces 100 units of utility and 37 units of disutility, then the net utility of the act is +63 units. If a particular act produces 100 units of disutility and 37 units of utility, then the net utility of the act is -63 units. Net utility is analogous to (1) net worth (assets minus liabilities), (2) net profit (income minus costs), and (3) net weight (the net weight of a bag of potato chips is the weight of the bag while full of chips minus the weight of the bag itself).

Suppose act x produces more net utility than any other act. Then act x alone is right. Since “right” means permissible, act x alone is permissible. If only one act is permissible, then it is (also) obligatory, and all other acts are forbidden.

Suppose acts x and y produce the same amount of net utility and no other act produces more net utility than they do. Each act—x and y—maximizes net utility, and each, therefore, is right. Since “right” means permissible, each act—x and y—is permissible and neither is obligatory. Each act, therefore, is discretionary (though it is obligatory to perform at least one of them), and all other acts are forbidden.

The Doctrine-of-Swine Objection:³

¹ Also known as Act Utilitarianism and Extreme Utilitarianism. The contrasts are with Rule Utilitarianism and Restricted Utilitarianism, respectively.
² Early on, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) referred to his theory as “the Principle of Utility.” Later, he called it “the Greatest Happiness Principle” or “the Greatest Felicity Principle,” in order to make it clear that (1) happiness is the only intrinsic good and (2) rightness consists in maximizing that good, not merely producing a satisfactory amount of it.
³ John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) states and replies to this objection in Utilitarianism, Chapter II, Paragraphs 3 through 8.
1. DU implies that \{the rightness of an act depends solely on the quantities of pleasure and pain brought about by that act and its alternatives\}.

2. It's false that \{the rightness of an act depends solely on the quantities of pleasure and pain brought about by that act and its alternatives\} (i.e., the rightness of an act depends on something other than, or in addition to, the quantities of pleasure and pain brought about by that act and its alternatives). Therefore,

3. DU implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).

4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false. Therefore,

5. DU is false (from 3 and 4).

Reply: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premise 4. At this point, there is a split among direct utilitarians:

i. Some direct utilitarians, such as John Stuart Mill, reject 1. (This is known as grasping the bull by the horn.) Mill is a qualitative hedonist, which means that he attends to both the quantity and the quality of pleasure and pain.

ii. Other direct utilitarians, such as Jeremy Bentham, reject 2. (This is known as biting the bullet.) Bentham is a quantitative hedonist, which means that he attends only to the quantity of pleasure and pain.  

Commentary: Bentham would probably view Mill's alteration of his theory as an adulteration. Mill obviously viewed it as an improvement.

The Too-High-for-Humanity Objection:

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4 According to Mill, "He [Bentham] says, somewhere in his works, that, 'quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry.'" John Stuart Mill, "Bentham," 1838. Mill was paraphrasing Bentham, probably from memory. In 1825, Bentham had written the following: "Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either." Jeremy Bentham, The Rationale of Reward (London: John and H. L. Hunt, 1825), 206.

5 Mill states and replies to this objection in Utilitarianism, Chapter II, Paragraph
1. DU implies that {an act is right only if it is motivated by universal benevolence}.
2. It’s false that {an act is right only if it is motivated by universal benevolence} (i.e., an act can be right even it is not motivated by universal benevolence).
   Therefore,
3. DU implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false.
   Therefore,
5. DU is unacceptable (from 3 and 4).

Reply: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premises 2 and 4, but rejects premise 1. (This is known as grasping the bull by the horn.) According to Mill, “the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much with the worth of the agent.”

Commentary: Mill’s view has the following implications: first, a good (worthy) person can act wrongly; second, a bad (unworthy) person can act rightly. Acts, motives, and persons are distinct objects of evaluation.

The Godlessness Objection:

1. A normative ethical theory is unacceptable if it is incompatible with the will of God.
2. DU is a normative ethical theory.
   Therefore,
3. DU is unacceptable if it is incompatible with the will of God (from 1 and 2).
4. DU is incompatible with the will of God.
   Therefore,
5. DU is unacceptable (from 3 and 4).

Reply: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series
of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premises 1 (for the sake of argument) and 2, but rejects premise 4. According to Mill, “If it be a true belief that God desires, above all things, the happiness of his creatures, and that this was his purpose in their creation, utility is not only not a godless doctrine, but more profoundly religious than any other.”

**Commentary:** Early on, utilitarianism was attacked as a “godless” doctrine, since, unlike Theological Voluntarism (TV) and Natural Law (NL), it makes no reference to a supreme being or an afterlife. Both Bentham and Mill replied to this objection.

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### The Lack-of-Time Objection

1. DU implies that {it is always right, prior to acting, to perform a utility calculation}.
2. It’s false that {it is always right, prior to acting, to perform a utility calculation} (i.e., it is not always right, prior to acting, to perform a utility calculation).
   Therefore,
3. DU implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false.
   Therefore,
5. DU is false (from 3 and 4).

**Reply:** The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premises 2 and 4, but rejects premise 1. (This is known as grasping the bull by the horn.) Performing a utility calculation is an act. As such, it must be evaluated by DU. Sometimes (for example, when a person has leisure to deliberate) DU obligates the agent to perform a utility calculation; sometimes (for example, in emergency situations) DU forbids the agent to perform a utility calculation.

**Commentary:** The series of objections to which Mill replies can be thought of not merely as a defense of DU, but as a clarification of it.

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7 Mill states and replies to this objection in *Utilitarianism*, Chapter II, Paragraph 24.
Here, Mill explains (to the critic and to anyone else who may be wondering) that his theory does not always obligate the agent to perform a utility calculation.

**The Supererogation Objection:**

1. DU implies that {there are no supererogatory acts}.
2. It’s false that {there are no supererogatory acts} (i.e., there are supererogatory acts).
   Therefore,
3. DU implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false.
   Therefore,
5. DU is false (from 3 and 4).

**Reply:** The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premise 4. At this point, there is a split among direct utilitarians:

i. Some direct utilitarians reject 1. (This is known as grasping the bull by the horn.) They say that DU, properly understood, does not require the production of the *best* consequences; it requires only the production of consequences that are *good enough*. This is known as satisficing (as opposed to maximizing) utilitarianism. “An agent who has done enough has discharged his moral obligations; an agent who has done more than enough has acted in a supererogatory way.”

ii. Other direct utilitarians reject 2. (This is known as biting the

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8 According to Simon Blackburn, supererogatory acts are "Deeds that are not 'required' but which go beyond the call of duty, as, for example, acts of exceptional goodness and heroism." He goes on to point out that "The category is interesting, in that many ethical theories fail to recognize it; e.g. for a direct utilitarian, either an action maximizes happiness, in which case it ought to be done, or it does not, in which case it ought not to be done." *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 354. According to John Rawls, “Supererogatory acts raise questions of first importance for ethical theory. For example, it seems offhand that the classical utilitarian view cannot account for them. It would appear that we are bound to perform actions which bring about a greater good for others whatever the cost to ourselves provided that the sum of advantages altogether exceeds that of other acts open to us.” John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 117.

bullet.) They say that every act is either obligatory (if it maximizes net utility) or forbidden (if it doesn’t). There are no discretionary acts. *A fortiori*, there are no discretionary acts that have a positive moral value, which is the definition of a supererogatory act.

**Commentary:** One of the many debates among utilitarians is whether their theory should be understood as maximizing net utility or as requiring something less than maximization. DU, as we have formulated it, requires maximization. See the definition of the word “optimific” above.

### The Promising Objection:

1. DU implies that {the only moral reason for keeping a promise is that doing so would maximize net utility}.
2. It’s false that {the only moral reason for keeping a promise is that doing so would maximize net utility} (i.e., there is a moral reason for keeping a promise other than the fact that doing so would maximize net utility).

   Therefore,
3. DU implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false.

   Therefore,
5. DU is false (from 3 and 4).

**Reply:** The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premises 1 and 4, but rejects premise 2. (This is known as biting the bullet.)

**Commentary:** Utilitarians are often accused of not taking promises seriously. To a direct utilitarian, whether a given promise should be kept depends solely on the consequences of keeping it as opposed to breaking it. The utilitarian looks forward (at what will happen), not backward (at what was done). Many people think that the mere fact that a promise was made creates an obligation to keep it (which is consistent with thinking that in exceptional cases, such as those in which breaking a promise is necessary to save a life, promises should be broken).
The Punishment Objection:

1. DU implies that {the only moral reason for punishing someone is that doing so would maximize net utility}.
2. It’s false that {the only moral reason for punishing someone is that doing so would maximize utility} (i.e., there is a moral reason for punishing someone other than the fact that doing so would maximize net utility).
   Therefore,
3. DU implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false.
   Therefore,
5. DU is false (from 3 and 4).

Reply: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premises 1 and 4, but rejects premise 2. (This is known as biting the bullet.)

Commentary: To a direct utilitarian, whether a given person should be punished depends solely on the consequences of punishing as opposed to not punishing. The utilitarian looks forward (at what will happen), not backward (at what was done or not done). Many people think that it is wrong to punish the innocent, no matter how much good will be produced (or evil prevented) thereby.

The Justice Objection:

1. DU implies that {the only moral reason for preferring one distribution of resources over another is that the one would produce more net utility than the other}.
2. It’s false that {the only moral reason for preferring one distribution of resources over another is that the one would produce more net utility than the other} (i.e., there is a moral reason

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10 “Utilitarian theory is embarrassed by the possibility of utility monsters who get enormously greater gains in utility from any sacrifice of others than these others lose. For, unacceptably, the theory seems to require that we all be sacrificed in the monster’s maw, in order to increase total utility.” Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 41.
for preferring one distribution of resources over another other than the fact that the one would produce more net utility than the other). Therefore,
3. DU implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false.
Therefore,
5. DU is false (from 3 and 4).

Reply: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premises 1 and 4, but rejects premise 2. (This is known as biting the bullet.)

Commentary: To a direct utilitarian, how resources are distributed is irrelevant. All that matters is the amount of net utility produced by a given distribution, as compared with the amount of net utility produced by alternative distributions.

The Counterintuitive-Consequences Objection I:12

1. DU implies that (it’s right for Jim to kill the Indian).13

11 “Or again, suppose that A is a very good and B a very bad man, should I then, even when I have made no promise, think it self-evidently right to produce 1,001 units of good for B rather than 1,000 for A? Surely not. I should be sensible of a prima facie duty of justice, i.e. of producing a distribution of goods in proportion to merit, which is not outweighed by such a slight disparity in the total goods to be produced.” W. D. Ross, The Right and the Good (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988 [1930]), 35.
12 “Any theory that counts only the consequences of the particular act as morally relevant results in many counterintuitive moral judgments.” Bernard Gert, Common Morality: Deciding What to Do (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 66.
13 “Jim finds himself in the central square of a small South American town. Tied up against the wall are a row of twenty Indians, most terrified, a few defiant, in front of them several armed men in uniform. A heavy man in a sweat-stained khaki shirt turns out to be the captain in charge and, after a good deal of questioning of Jim which establishes that he got there by accident while on a botanical expedition, explains that the Indians are a random group of the inhabitants who, after recent acts of protest against the government, are just about to be killed to remind other possible protestors of the advantages of not protesting. However, since Jim is an honoured visitor from another land, the captain is happy to offer him a guest’s privilege of killing one of the Indians himself. If Jim accepts, then as a special mark of the occasion, the other Indians will be let off. Of course, if Jim refuses, then there is no special occasion, and Pedro here will do what he was about to do when Jim arrived, and kill them all. Jim, with some desperate recollection of schoolboy fiction, wonders
2. It’s false that (it’s right for Jim to kill the Indian) (i.e., it’s wrong for Jim to kill the Indian).
   Therefore,
3. DU implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false.
   Therefore,
5. DU is false (from 3 and 4).

Reply: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premises 1 and 4, but rejects premise 2. (This is known as biting the bullet.)

Commentary: This is one of many alleged counterintuitive consequences of DU. The criticism is that DU “permits too much (permitting acts that should not be permitted).”

The Counterintuitive-Consequences Objection II:

1. DU implies that (it’s obligatory for Bob to throw the switch (thereby saving the child)).

Whether if he got hold of a gun, he could hold the captain, Pedro and the rest of the soldiers to threat, but it is quite clear from the set-up that nothing of that kind is going to work: any attempt at that sort of thing will mean that all the Indians will be killed, and himself. The men against the wall, and the other villagers, understand the situation, and are obviously begging him to accept. What should he do?” Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” in Utilitarianism: For and Against, by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 75-150, at 98-9.


15 “Bob is close to retirement. He has invested most of his savings in a very rare and valuable old car, a Bugatti, which he has not been able to insure. The Bugatti is his pride and joy. In addition to the pleasure he gets from driving and caring for his car, Bob knows that its rising market value means that he will always be able to sell it and live comfortably after retirement. One day when Bob is out for a drive, he parks the Bugatti near the end of a railway siding and goes for a walk up the track. As he does so, he sees that a runaway train, with no one aboard, is running down the railway track. Looking farther down the track, he sees the small figure of a child very likely to be killed by the runaway train. He can’t stop the train and the child is too far away to warn of the danger, but he can throw a switch that will divert the train down the siding where his Bugatti is parked. Then nobody will be killed—but the train will destroy his Bugatti. Thinking of his joy in owning the car and the financial security it represents, Bob decides not to throw the switch. The child is killed. For many years to come, Bob enjoys owning his Bugatti and the financial security it represents.” Peter Singer, “The Singer Solution to World Poverty,” The New York Times (5 September 1999). Singer got this example from Peter Unger, Living High and
2. It’s false that (it’s obligatory for Bob to throw the switch (thereby saving the child)) (i.e., it’s permissible for Bob not to throw the switch (thereby saving the child). Therefore,
3. DU implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false. Therefore,
5. DU is false (from 3 and 4).

**Reply:** The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premises 1 and 4, but rejects premise 2. (This is known as biting the bullet.)

**Commentary:** This is one of many alleged counterintuitive consequences of DU. The criticism is that DU “demands too much (requiring sacrifices that are not in fact morally required).”

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**The Demandingness Objection:**

1. A normative ethical theory is false if it demands too much.
2. DU is a normative ethical theory. Therefore,
3. DU is false if it demands too much (from 1 and 2).
4. DU demands too much. Therefore,
5. DU is false (from 3 and 4).

**Reply:** The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The direct utilitarian accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The direct utilitarian also accepts premises 1 and 2, but rejects premise 4. DU doesn’t demand too much; ordinary morality demands too little.


16 Kagan, The Limits of Morality, xii.

17 “The most ubiquitous objection against Consequentialism generally and utilitarianism in particular is that it demands too much, requiring agents to act in ways that they cannot reasonably be required to act.” Jamieson and Elliot, 241. “The core of the demandingness objection in all of its forms is that Consequentialism fails as a moral theory because it implies that moral agents have classes of obligations that they do not have.” Ibid., 242.
said doing the right thing would be easy?

David Sobel\textsuperscript{18} takes a different approach. He argues that the Demandingness Objection is question-begging. Here is his argument:

1. DU demands too much only if the Requiring/Allowing Distinction\textsuperscript{19} is true.
2. The Requiring/Allowing Distinction is true only if DU is false.
   Therefore,
3. DU demands too much only if DU is false (from 1 and 2).

Premise 4 of the Demandingness Objection is supposed to (help) establish the conclusion that DU is false; instead, it assumes that DU is false. Thus, the objection is question-begging.

\textsuperscript{18} David Sobel, “The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection,” Philosophers’ Imprint 7 (September 2007).

\textsuperscript{19} The Requiring/Allowing Distinction says that the demandingness of a normative ethical theory depends on what it requires agents to do rather than on what it allows patients to suffer. Sobel’s example is as follows: “Joe has two healthy kidneys and can live a decent but reduced life with only one. Sally needs one of Joe’s kidneys to live.” Ibid. DU requires that Joe give Sally a kidney. From Joe’s point of view, this is too demanding; it requires too much of him. From Sally’s point of view, however, any theory other than DU is too demanding, for it requires too much of her (namely, that she go without a kidney, resulting in her death). The Requiring/Allowing Distinction says that only DU is too demanding, since only DU (in this case) requires someone to do something.