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to a level of sufficiency but allowing relative inequalities beyond that point), both of which attempt to establish a compromise between the egalitarian intuition and the idea that welfare also matters as an independent good.

The fact that unrestricted equality can have such counterintuitive consequences has also led some philosophers to question whether equality is a distinct value or whether it should be properly understood as a distributive relation that supervenes upon other more basic values? Utilitarian theories from Bentham’s to the present acknowledge this challenge by defending equality as a subordinate end of legislation or utilitarian policy making.

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See also ANIMALS; BENTHAM, JEREMY; DIMINISHING MARGINAL UTILITY; JUSTICE; MAXIMIZATION; MILL, JOHN STUART; PARFIT, DEREK; PREFERENCES (PREFERENTIALISM); RIGHTS; SINGER, PETER; UTILITY; WELFARE (WELFARISM).

ETHICAL EGOISM

Ethical Egoism, like utilitarianism, is a normative ethical theory. Whereas utilitarianism holds that an act is right just in case it maximizes overall utility, Ethical Egoism holds that an act is right just in case it maximizes agent utility. Ethical Egoism must not be confused with psychological egoism, which is a descriptive or positive theory, as opposed to a normative theory, of human nature. Psychological egoism holds that all human acts are motivated by self-interest. The two theories are connected in that psychological egoism, when conjoined with the “ought-implies-can” principle, is sometimes said to provide rational support for ethical egoism. If it is impossible to act against self-interest, as psychological egoism asserts, then, by the “ought-implies-can” principle, one has no obligation to act against self-interest. This, however, falls short of establishing that one is obligated to maximize one’s utility. At most, it establishes that it is permissible to maximize one’s utility.

Egoism (as I shall henceforth refer to the normative ethical theory) can be viewed as the antithesis of utilitarianism in the following sense. Utilitarianism requires impartiality. As J. S. Mill famously put it, “the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator” (Mill, CW, vol. 10, p. 218). Egoism not only rejects impartiality; it also requires the most extreme form of partiality. Less extreme forms are familialism, clanism, tribalism, nationalism, racism, sexism, and speciesism. In each case, rightness is said to be a function of the maximization of utility for some subset of the whole: the family, the clan, and so forth. Utilitarianism and egoism can be thought of as poles on the partiality spectrum, with many theories intermediate between them.
Egoism is like utilitarianism in all other respects. It is consequentialist, in that it evaluates acts solely in terms of their consequences. It can be either maximizing or satisfying, monistic or pluralistic, hedonistic or ideal. It has direct and indirect variants. Act egoism is analogous to act utilitarianism, while rule egoism is analogous to rule utilitarianism. If there is a problem with consequentialism, it afflicts both egoism and utilitarianism. If rule utilitarianism collapses into act utilitarianism, then, by parity of reasoning, rule egoism collapses into act egoism. Moreover, since both egoism and utilitarianism supply “ultimate ends,” neither is “amenable to direct proof” (Mill, CW, vol. 10, p. 207). The only basis on which to prefer one theory to the other is impartiality, for that is the only respect in which the theories differ.

There is, however, one respect in which egoism may have an advantage over utilitarianism. Egoism, unlike utilitarianism, does not require interpersonal comparisons of utility. The only utility that matters, according to egoism, is the agent’s utility. Egoism does, of course, require intrapersonal comparisons of utility (I must give all time slices of myself equal weight in my deliberations), but this is not thought to raise the conceptual and practical problems that are raised by interpersonal comparisons of utility.

Criticisms of egoism are legion. Some critics, such as James Rachels (1974, 1978), maintain that it is not a normative ethical theory at all (on the ground that it cannot resolve interpersonal conflicts). Others, such as Kurt Baier (1973), concede that it is a normative ethical theory, but allege that it is self-contradictory or incoherent. Still others, such as Fred Feldman (1978), concede that it is coherent, but insist that it is false, and therefore unacceptable. The most usual way to show that it is false is to show that it has one or more false implications. But here the egoist can make the same moves as the utilitarian. The egoist can either grasp the bull by the horn (i.e. deny that the theory has the stated implication) or bite the bullet (i.e. admit that the theory has the stated implication but accept it, painful though that may be). J. J. C. Smart (1961), for example, refuses to subordinate his utilitarian theory to his intuitions in particular cases. The egoist can do the same.

Critics have, unfortunately, employed a double standard when it comes to egoism. They deny to the egoist the various moves, defences, and replies that they allow to the utilitarian. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there is a prevailing bias against egoism among professional philosophers. One well-known philosopher has gone so far as to claim that egoism is “morally pernicious.” James Rachels writes: “[E]thical egoism says straight-out that we need never be concerned with the needs or interests of other people, except insofar as they are useful to us; and this seems, on its face, an encouragement to wickedness” (Rachels, 1974, p. 308). The first point to be made in response to Rachels’s criticism is that wickedness is compatible with truth. A theory can be true but wicked, just as a theory can be false but nonwicked. If egoism is the correct account of our moral obligations, then its alleged wickedness is neither here nor there. Are we to reject determinism on the ground that it leads people to believe that they have no choice over their actions? Are we to reject utilitarianism on the ground that it has led to various horrors, such as Stalin’s purges? Smart has written that, “If it were known to be true, as a question of fact, that measures which caused misery and death to tens of millions today would result in saving from greater misery and from death hundreds of millions in the future, and if this were the only way in which it could be done, then it would be right to cause these necessary atrocities” (Smart, p. 61; see also Glover, pp. 254–6; and Scruton, 2006, who notes “Lenin and Hitler were pious utilitarians,
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as were Stalin and Mao, as are most members of the Mafia.”). Of course, no self-respecting egoist would admit that his or her theory is wicked! The theory requires the maximization of agent utility, not the pursuit of momentary pleasure, wealth, or power. Surely it is not in my long-term enlightened self-interest to rob, steal, embezzle, murder, lie, cheat, or break promises, if only because these acts will motivate retaliation against me by my victims (or their families and friends). Indeed, it is possible that egoism, in either its act or its rule formulation, provides a solid ground for common-sense duties such as the duty to keep promises. Rachels has done nothing to show that this is not the case. And even if he had shown it, he would also have had to show that utilitarianism and other theories do not have unacceptable implications. As has been widely noted, every normative ethical theory, including utilitarianism, has unacceptable implications to someone. Egoism has unacceptable implications to Rachels, utilitarianism has unacceptable implications to others. If egoism is wicked because it has unacceptable implications to someone, then so, it would seem, is every other normative ethical theory, including utilitarianism.

It is sometimes argued that if everyone pursued his or her self-interest, overall utility would be maximized. This may appear to be an argument for egoism, which requires the pursuit of self-interest, but in fact it is not. Egoism holds that the pursuit of self-interest is an end in itself, indeed the ultimate end. The argument in question maintains that the pursuit of self-interest is a means—perhaps the best means—of attaining the end of overall utility. The argument, therefore, presupposes the correctness of utilitarianism, which is why it is known as the “closet-utilitarian argument.” Whether it is true that the pursuit of self-interest maximizes overall utility is, of course, a factual question, about which philosophers, as such, have nothing to say.

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Further Reading


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See also ACT UTILITARIANISM; CONSEQUENTIALISM; IMPARTIALITY; MAXIMIZATION; PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM.

ETHICS

Utilitarianism is often defined in terms of Jeremy Bentham’s claim that “the greatest happiness of the greatest number ... is the measure of right and wrong” (Bentham, 1977, p. 393). Few people these days defend utilitarianism in this form, however. Even Bentham seems to have used this phrase only to give a general idea of his theory. When writing more precisely, he talked about the greatest sum of happiness (Bentham, 1970, p. 12). Since Bentham, there have been a number of other variations: for example, moving from happiness specifically to good consequences more generally; from maximizing to nonmaximizing versions; from a focus on acts to a focus on rules. However, what they share in common is a focus on outcomes, rather than acts themselves. In contrast, deontological theories are likely to claim that the killing of an innocent human being, for example, is simply wrong (or, at least, pro tanto wrong). Utilitarianism can also be contrasted with virtue theory, which focuses on the virtues of the agent, or with contractualism, which focuses on agreement (or hypothetical agreement).

This entry considers three questions: What is the main appeal of utilitarian moral theory? How does it compare with other theories? What are the main criticisms of the theory?

For many, the appeal of utilitarianism is captured by Samuel Scheffler. Responding to Bernard Williams’ 1973 prediction that utilitarianism won’t be taken seriously for long (Williams, p. 150), Scheffler claimed that utilitarianism remains attractive to many because of the deeply plausible-sounding feature that one may always do what would lead to the best available outcome overall (Scheffler, pp. 3–4). Jonathan Wolff emphasizes the appeal of utilitarianism in terms of its ability to challenge orthodoxy, with clear criteria of what makes an act right that doesn’t allow people to appeal to preexisting prejudice (Wolff, p. 90). Similarly, many utilitarians emphasize the purely rational nature of utilitarianism, characterizing deontology, in contrast, as relying on intuition or emotion. Peter Singer, for example, writes: “The way people do in fact judge has nothing to do with the validity of my conclusion. My conclusion follows from the principle which I advanced earlier, and unless that principle is rejected, or the arguments are shown to be unsound, I think the conclusion must stand, however strange it appears” (Singer, 1972, p. 236). In a similar vein, discussing Judith Jarvis Thomson in particular, Sumner complains that, unless one shares the intuitions she starts with, her arguments are merely an “interesting exercise” (Sumner, 2000, p. 301). In addition, Singer (2005) also appeals to recent findings in evolutionary psychology and the neurosciences to challenge the normative force of intuitive judgements.

It is not clear, however, that these arguments are conclusive. Regarding the earlier arguments claiming that utilitarian theories are uniquely rational without relying on intuition, Kamm states that utilitarians also rely on intuitive judgements—“those about the plausibility of general principles, such as ‘maximize the good’” (Kamm, p. 417).