

Ethical Theory

Classical Utilitarianism

As you read the material for our next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the reading:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.

Reading

- Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chapters 1 & 4 (pp. 17–22 & 41–43 in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*).

Questions

1. Bentham endorses what is typically called classical utilitarianism. Recall (from *Normative Ethics*, section 2.6) that utilitarianism combines the following claims at the level of factors:
 - A. Factoral teleology,
 - B. Factoral consequentialism,
 - C. Factoral welfarism,
 - D. A theory of well-being, and
 - E. The total view, which is the combination of . . .
 - E1. Quantitative monism,
 - E2. Sum ranking, and
 - E3. Optimization.

In what ways does Bentham's moral calculus involve each of these?

2. When it comes to a theory of well-being, Bentham clearly endorses one based on happiness. But what exactly does he mean by happiness? That is, which theory of well-being (from *Normative Ethics*, section 2.2) does he seem to endorse and label as "happiness"?
3. How would you describe Bentham's foundational theory for justifying classical utilitarianism? In particular, how does Bentham justify that happiness (as he understands the term) ought to be at the very foundation of morality? In addition, Bentham's talk of the "extent" of happiness appears to reject foundational egoism, so what sort of argument might he make to justify foundational consequentialism?
4. The common assumption is that Bentham uses acts as the evaluative focal point when justifying classical utilitarianism. Do you agree? If so, where in the text do you see him endorsing acts as the proper focal point? If not, what focal point(s) does he use, and can Bentham really justify factoral consequentialism without focusing solely on acts?