

# *Utilitarianism/Consequentialism*

---

## 1 Some history

**Consequentialism** is a family of theories about what makes an *action* right. There are a bunch of different kinds of consequentialism, but the first and most influential of these theories is **act utilitarianism**.

**Act utilitarianism** is often regarded as having originated with Jeremy Bentham. Bentham was a **hedonist**, and so his version of utilitarianism relies on hedonism. He is also known for promoting various legal reforms. He devised his own kind of prison called the *panopticon*: a prison where the prisoners can be seen by guards but not vice versa.

**John Stuart Mill** was another influential consequentialist that followed Bentham.

## 2 What is consequentialism?

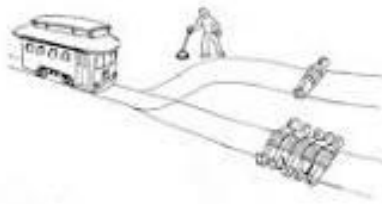
Consequentialism, first and foremost, is a theory of *actions*. Specifically, it is a theory for determining whether an action is good or bad. Fundamentally, consequentialists believe an act is good or required if it **produces the best overall results**. Such an action is called an **optimific action**.

Some example cases of people attempting to perform (or at least attempting to perform) **optimific actions**:

**PIZZA:** John is deciding whether to get cheese or pepperoni pizza for his party. The pizza place he is ordering from will only let him get one; he can't get some cheese and some pepperoni. He discovers that only one person prefers pepperoni to cheese. So, he decides to get a cheese pizza.

Here's a less mundane case of someone performing an optimific action:

**TROLLEY:** Jane is at a place where a trolley's tracks split. Jane also sees a switch that controls which set of tracks the trolley will go on. On one set of tracks, she notices five people are tied down. On the other set of tracks, one person is tied down. A trolley is coming, and Jane does not have time to untie anyone. The switch is set so that the trolley will go to the set of tracks with five people on it. Jane pulls the switch so that the trolley goes on the set of tracks with just one person.



These are some pretty clear cases where the action performed is optimific. But how do we **know** that an action is optimific? Russ Shafer-Landau notes that there is a 5-step process that consequentialists endorse:

**FIVE STEPS:**

1. Identify what is intrinsically good—valuable in and of itself, and worth having for its own sake.
2. Next, identify what is intrinsically bad (i.e., bad all by itself).
3. Then determine all your options. Which actions are open to you at the moment?
4. For each option, determine the value of its results. How much intrinsic good does it produce and how much intrinsic bad does it produce?
5. Finally, pick the action that yields the greatest net balance of good over bad. That is the optimific choice and (according to consequentialism) that is your moral duty. Doing anything else is immoral.

**Act utilitarians** say that the only things that are intrinsically good are pleasure and the absence of pain. And so, they affirm the following:

**PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY:** *An action is morally required (or good) just because it does more to improve overall happiness<sup>1</sup> than any other action you could have done in the circumstances.*

### 3 Three cases to help us understand act utilitarianism

**1 BILLIONAIRE:** You are given the choice to donate 8 billion dollars. You have two options: You can give everyone on earth \$1 **or** you can use the money to eliminate world hunger and give everyone on earth clean drinking water.

**Discussion question:** Which of these options would the utilitarian say you should choose?

**2 HUNGER GAMES:** In the future, teenagers are made to fight each other to the death in a multi-day televised gladiatorial event called “the Hunger Games”. Let us suppose that watching this event produces more pleasure for the viewers of this event than anything else they could do.

**Discussion question:** Would an act utilitarian say the Hunger Games are morally good?

**3 MISMATCHED TROLLEY:** Jane is at a place where a trolley’s tracks split. Jane also sees a switch that controls which set of tracks the trolley will go on. On the **left set** of tracks, she notices five people are tied down. On the **right set** of tracks, one person is tied down. A trolley is coming, and Jane does not have time to untie anyone. Unbeknownst to Jane, the switch is labeled incorrectly. It’s currently set to go **right set** of tracks even though the label says it’s set to go down the **left set** of tracks. Jane pulls the switch, and as a result, five people get ran over by the trolley.

**Discussion questions:** (1) Would an act utilitarian say that Jane’s action was morally wrong?  
(2) Would an act utilitarian say Jane should be punished for pulling the switch?

---

<sup>1</sup> Let us use the word “happiness” to refer to the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain. This is a controversial understanding of the word happiness, but it’ll make things simpler than saying “the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain” over and over again.

## 4 The attractions of act utilitarianism

**Attraction 1:** General explanatory power: act utilitarianism fits with a **lot** of cases.

**Attraction 2:** Act utilitarianism is *morally flexible*.

**Attraction 3:** Act utilitarianism is *impartial*. That is to say, act utilitarians say it doesn't matter who you're benefitting; it doesn't matter who you're producing pleasure for or reducing pain for. Act utilitarianism is blind to **social position, economic status, religion, ethnic background, or gender**.

- **Discussion question:** Suppose you have two options: You can help your grandma cross the street or you can help an old person that you don't know. Which should you choose? Does your answer cause a problem for the act utilitarian?
- **Discussion question:** Does the fact that act utilitarianism is *impartial* require us to treat animals differently than we typically do?