

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.06J / STS.006J Bioethics
Spring 2009

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

Recitation 11: Utilitarianism

1. The view

Utilitarianism is a combination of two theses:

- Hedonism: the only intrinsic good is pleasure
- Consequentialism: the right action is the one whose consequences maximize the good.

Hedonic Utilitarianism: the right action (of those available to an agent) is the action that would result in a total world history of the greatest value (total pleasure minus total pain).

2. Applying the view

- killing vs. letting die cases (a plethora of these)
- abortion (rape, failed contraception, severely disabled fetus)
- obligations to optimize pregnancy
- genetic engineering: treatment and enhancement
- kidneys (the Zell Kravinsky argument)

3. Presentation: Vidya Eswaran on the Utilitarian conception of value

4. Criticizing the view

- Is pleasure the only intrinsic good?
 - the case of deluded happy people
 - the pleasure machine
 - the world on opiates
- Should equality of distribution matter?
- We cannot know the consequences of our actions.
- Agents will be constantly calculating utility.
- Utilitarianism permits too much.
 - five people need organs, one person has enough for all five
 - framing an innocent person to prevent terrible riots
- Utilitarianism demands too much.
 - we should give almost all our money to Oxfam
- Utilitarianism compromises our integrity.
 - George the pacifist scientist and Jim among the guerillas
- Utilitarianism is psychologically unsustainable.

How might a Utilitarian respond to these problems?

Are the Utilitarian responses persuasive?

Do any of these responses require the Utilitarian to substantially amend her view?