

GOING FURTHER: Preference Utilitarianism

Types of Utilitarianism

Classical Utilitarianism expressed by thinkers such as Bentham and Mill identifies the ultimate aim or 'good' that we are aiming for as 'Happiness.' Although each has a different understanding of what happiness means and how much certain pleasures are worth, it is the aim of both thinkers to **maximise happiness**. Other thinkers have disputed whether this should be the sole aim of human beings. G.E Moore (1873-1958) was an Ideal Utilitarian. He believed that there were certain intrinsic goods such as friendship, love and beauty that utilitarians should strive towards. More recently there have been several Utilitarian thinkers who have identified **preference** satisfaction and welfare as the ultimate aim.

Preference Utilitarianism.

The most popular form of modern Utilitarianism is preference Utilitarianism as held by Peter Singer (1946-) and others. Preference Utilitarianism recognises that different people will have **different views about what happiness is**. Preference Utilitarianism argues that people should be allowed to pursue their preferences as long as it does not interfere with anyone else's pursuit of happiness. Hence the morally good thing to do is that which maximises the satisfaction of the preferences of most people.

One advantage of this form of utilitarianism is that it may be **easier to measure**. In addition, it allows individuals to pursue their own interests and not be restricted to whatever the majority deems to be happiness. (contra Bentham) Hence there are **less demands** in preference Utilitarianism. Singer states that 'the utilitarian position is a minimal one. . . that we reach by universalising self-interested decision making.'

Thirdly we **retain the flexibility** of resolving different cases and issues differently, we are not tied to the rule Utilitarianism of Mill.

Three Practical Examples

For Singer, consciousness and the ability to express preferences are key to his understanding of personhood. Persons are any creature that is able to think rationally and has self awareness

1. Animal Rights: Singer considers that higher species of animals may well have preferences. Obviously they are unable to express their preferences using language but Singer argues that preferences should be understood in a wider sense as interests. It is in a dog's interest not to be made to fight another dog. It is in a cow's interest not to be eaten. Although human being may have a preference for

eating meat or watching dogs fight, these are minor interests and cannot be put above a major interest such as an animal staying alive. He also controversially argues that the interests and preferences of some animals ought to be put above those of severely brain damaged human orphans. (can you see why?)

2. Euthanasia: Singer observes that we may have religious reasons for opposing euthanasia. If that is the case, then our preference should be respected if we become seriously ill. However, we have no right to impose our views on others who may have a different preference. It is up to the person who is ill and if they become incapable of such a decision then the preferences of their family become the key thing. Singer has provoked widespread controversy by suggesting that parents should be allowed to request euthanasia for severely handicapped infants
3. Abortion: Singer does not believe that the foetus has personhood. Can you work out what Singer's views will be on this topic??

Singer argues that when we think about preferences we should be like an 'impartial observer' thinking through what is best for everyone concerned.

Preference, Welfare or Interests?

One problem with the literal interpretation of preference utilitarianism is that some humans may be incapable of expressing preferences either temporarily or permanently. Like Singer, most preference utilitarians tend to talk in the wider sense of what is in someone's interests. For example someone who is clinically depressed may request euthanasia but because of their condition, there are good reasons for discounting their preference. Because of issues such as this, some Utilitarians subscribe to a slightly different position called Welfare Utilitarianism.