

## 7. CHAPTER 7: THE UTILITARIAN APPROACH

### 7.1. The Revolution in Ethics

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832):

Morality is not a matter of pleasing God, nor is it a matter of faithfulness to abstract rules. *Morality is nothing more than the attempt to bring about as much happiness as possible in this world.*

We should ask what course of conduct would promote the greatest amount happiness for all those who will be affected. Morality requires that we do what is best from that point of view.

To understand the radicalness of the Principle of Utility, we have to appreciate what it leaves out of its picture of morality: gone are all references to God or to abstract moral rules "written in the heavens." Morality is no longer to be understood as faithfulness to some divinely given code, or to some set of inflexible rules. The point of morality is seen as the happiness of beings in this world, and nothing more; and we are permitted -- even required -- to do whatever is necessary to promote that happiness. That, in its time, was a revolutionary idea.

### 7.2. First Example: Euthanasia

The dominant moral tradition in our society is the Christian tradition. One of the Church's doctrines is that the intentional killing of innocent people is always wrong. Utilitarianism takes a very different approach. What action would produce the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness for all concerned? Utilitarians have concluded that euthanasia may, in some cases, be morally right.

The morally right thing to do, on any occasion, is whatever would bring about the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness.

On at least some occasions, the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness may be brought about by mercy killing.

Therefore, on at least some occasions, mercy killing may be morally right.

If from the utilitarian viewpoint, euthanasia is moral, should it also be made legal?

### 7.3. Second Example: Nonhuman Animals

St. Thomas Aquinas indicated that people and animals are in entirely separate moral categories. Strictly speaking animals have no moral standing of their own.

Utilitarian's have a different idea. If an individual is capable of suffering, then we have a duty to take that into account when we are deciding what to do, even if the individual in question is nonhuman.

To Bentham and Mill, humans and nonhumans are equally entitled to moral concern.

*The utilitarian argument is simple enough. We should judge actions right or wrong depending upon whether they cause more happiness or unhappiness.*