

UU 201 – ETHICS FOR UU'S
WORKSHOPS 3A & 3B – THE COLLECTIVE GOOD
AGENDA

All action is for the sake of some end; and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient. — John Stuart Mill

INTRODUCTION

Many of us make our ethical decisions by trying to act in accordance with moral rules, such as "it is always wrong to kill another person" or "lying to someone is unacceptable." We follow these rules to the best of our ability, recognizing there are times when we fall short. This approach to ethics relies on the premise that there are moral truths underlying the ethical rules by which we live, and that it is our individual responsibility to be guided by and uphold these moral truths. For some, the seven Unitarian Universalist Principles are a set of moral rules that form the foundation of a rules-based approach to ethical living.

There are times when a rules-based morality does not adequately address the ethical dilemmas we face. For John Stuart Mill, an influential 19th-century British philosopher, whether or not moral rules are followed is not the important issue. What is important is the result or outcome of an ethical decision. Mills was a proponent of the school of ethical thought often referred to as utilitarianism or teleological ethics. This ethical system asks: What is the utility (the usefulness) of any particular decision we might make? What will be the outcome if we take (or do not take) a particular action?

The goal in utilitarian ethics is to strive to attain the best possible outcome for the maximum number of people. Where a rules-based ethical system focuses on the individual's adherence to truth, a utilitarian ethical system focuses on communal welfare. In this system, individual needs matter less than the needs of the community and moral decisions are often driven by specific circumstances.

Beyond striving to attain the best possible outcome for the maximum number of people, Mill, as a proponent of Utilitarianism, embraced the belief that all human actions are intended to promote and attain happiness. As such, an action would be considered right and valuable if it promotes happiness, and wrong, without any value, if it produces unhappiness.

Although John Stuart Mill adhered to the belief that pleasure, or happiness, is the only thing that has intrinsic value, and that as such actions that promote happiness are right, and those that do not, are wrong, he did not intend to mean that all types of pleasure were of equal value. Mill distinguished between the pursuit of higher pleasures such as the use of the mind, and pursuit of the lower pleasures of the body.

This workshop will introduce utilitarian ethics and examine some of the complexities inherent in a utilitarian ethical framework. We will consider: How do we determine what is morally "right" in a particular circumstance? How do we evaluate our options to determine which actions will truly benefit the largest number of people? Who "counts" in such a schema? How do we define "benefit"? Along with exploring reasons for adopting a utilitarian stance, we will consider a critique of such a stance, asking: If one takes the utilitarian/teleological form of ethical reasoning to its logical conclusion, could not any behavior be justified simply by staking claim to the greater good?

Could not any behavior be justified simply by claiming that it has inherent value because it results in happiness rather than pain?

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GOALS

This workshop will:

- Introduce utilitarian/teleological ethics, a moral framework concerned with outcomes rather than motivation, and with community rather than the individual
- Explore the fifth Unitarian Universalist Principle using the lens of utilitarianism/teleological ethics
- Guide participants to explore circumstances where a utilitarian ethical framework is or could be applied to moral decision making
- Examine the idea that in a democracy advocacy for particular decisions—or courses of action and reasons for decisions taken—are often framed in part by utilitarian arguments
- Consider ways in which values such as justice and inclusion are contained in Mill's notion of "greater good."

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this workshop, participants will:

- Be acquainted with utilitarian/teleological ethics
- Identify times and circumstances when their behavioral choices were based on this framework of ethical decision making
- Understand the idea that morality should be based on the greatest good for the greatest number of people and identify the strengths and weaknesses of this approach
- Be able to identify values implicit in determining the "greater good" in a given situation and identify voices and perspectives represented by those values.

COVENANT

Wishing to create a cohesive code of ethics grounded in an understanding of the various historical and philosophical traditions on developing a personal approach to ethically driven practices introduced in the UU 201 class, Ethics for UU's, we agree to abide by Unitarian Universalist values and principles, apply what we learn in class, and covenant with each other to

- Practice deep listening,

- Speak freely, honestly, respectfully, and civilly,
- Afford all group members the opportunity to contribute without interruption or faultfinding.

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WORKSHOP 3A - AT-A-GLANCE

Activity	Minutes
• Welcoming, signing-in, resources & handouts	5
• Group Covenant	5
• Reading and lighting the chalice	5
• Activity 1: Opening Scenario	10
• Activity 2: Utilitarian Ethics	25

Handouts:

- Opening Scenario
- Utilitarianism and About John Stuart Mill

WORKSHOP 3A Homework:

- Become familiar with Workshops 3A and B Introduction, Goals, and Learning Outcomes
- Review our covenant
- Review Opening Scenario, Activity 1 in handout
- Read Excerpt from John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism and About John Stuart Mill, Activity 2 in handout

WORKSHOP 3B - AT-A-GLANCE

Activity	Minutes
• Welcoming, signing-in, resources/handouts	5
• Reading and lighting the chalice	5
• Group Covenant	5
• Activity 1: The Lesser of Two Evils	20
• Activity 2: Social Justice Outreach: Needs of the Few	20
• Activity 3: Taking it home	5

Handouts:

- The Lesser of Two Evils – Activity 1

- Social Justice Outreach: Needs of the Few – Activity 2 Handout
- Taking it Home Handout – Activity 3 Handout

WORKSHOP 3B Homework:

- Complete Activity 1 : The Lesser of Two Evils at home and come prepared to discuss at the workshop
- Read Activity 2: Social Justice Outreach: The Needs of the Few handout
- Review Activity 3: Taking It Home handout.

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HANDOUTS

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ACTIVITY 1: OPENING SCENARIO

You are on a television game show. You are offered a choice of two doors to open. You are told that if you open door Number 1, you will receive a million dollars. If you open door Number 2, everyone in your neighborhood, except you and your family members, will receive a million dollars and will be legally prohibited from giving you any of their new-found wealth. What do you do and why?

ACTIVITY 2: UTILITARIAN ETHICS - ABOUT JOHN STUART MILL

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was a 19th-century British politician and political philosopher. Born and raised in London, Mill had a brilliant mind: He learned Greek starting at the age of three, and Latin and algebra when he was eight. He went on to serve the University of St. Andrews as Rector, and held various elected public positions. As a liberal political theorist, he was deeply concerned about the role of government in promoting human welfare.

In his book, *Utilitarianism*, Mill introduced the idea that morally sound actions lead to outcomes that offer the greatest possible happiness to the greatest possible number of people. His idea can be rephrased this way: What is morally sound is that which produces the greatest good to the greatest extent possible.

ACTIVITY 2: UTILITARIAN ETHICS - EXCERPT FROM JOHN STUART MILL'S UTILITARIANISM*

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.

By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.

To give a clear view of the moral standard set up by the theory, much more requires to be said; in particular, what things it includes in the ideas of pain and pleasure; and to what extent this is left an open question. But these supplementary explanations do not affect the theory of life on which this theory of morality is grounded - namely, that pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends;

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle, the ultimate end, for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality. . . . This, being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, . . . [which, if observed, would lead to the Greatest Happiness], to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but so far as the nature of things admits to the whole sentient creation.

* John Stewart Mills, Chapter 2, *Utilitarianism* (London: Longmans, Green, Ryder, and Dyer, 1871).

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ACTIVITY 1: THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS

At home, read the following questions for reflection. Write or draw in your journal your responses. Answers will be discussed and shared in small groups at the workshop.

- When have you had to make a choice between unappealing or downright undesirable options (i.e., what we sometimes call choosing the lesser of two evils)?
- What was the situation?
- What values were in conflict?
- Did you apply utilitarian moral reasoning to your decision-making process?

Once in your group, share

- What did you discover about your decision-making process when confronted with a lesser of two evils situation?
- What values did you uphold in your decision-making process?
- How did you determine which was the greater good?

Choose someone from your small group and report

- Did your group find examples of times when altruism or generosity (caring about the needs/interests of the many) trumped self-interest or self-preservation?
- Did anyone in your group find that emotional reactions influenced responses/decisions?

ACTIVITY 2: SOCIAL JUSTICE OUTREACH: THE NEEDS OF THE FEW *

Mill's utilitarianism was criticized at the time as potentially promoting a tyranny of the majority. Mill disputed this assertion, stating that "the greatest good for the greatest number" could only be correctly discerned in a climate where human liberty and rational judgment were valued. Mill was ahead of his time in many ways, speaking out forcefully against slavery, against censorship, and against the social construction of gender roles that oppressed women, basing those positions on a utilitarian ethical framework.

Mill's strong support for the rights of the oppressed highlights his position that to truly determine "the greatest good for the greatest number" in any given situation it is necessary to include those who are disenfranchised or in a minority position in the rights and privileges enjoyed by the majority. For him, such inclusion was an essential requirement of both liberty and justice, which he viewed as "good."

Mill was deeply influenced by the earlier work of English legal scholar Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), who was a Unitarian, but Mill was not affiliated with any religion. After John Stuart Mill's death, there was discussion of his religion in the *Unitarian Review and Religious Magazine*, which stated, "Mr. Mill [son of John Stuart Mill] testifies that his father died without the smallest wavering in his convictions on the

subject of religion, died, that is to say, believing as to God and a life hereafter, that no grounds exist for any belief whatsoever; and holding in hatred . . . not this or that religion, but religion itself as a hindrance to the world's comfort and improvement."

*Charles Lowe, "The Religious View of John Stuart Mill," *Unitarian Review and Religious Magazine*, Vol. 1 (1874).

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ACTIVITY 3: TAKING IT HOME

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Between workshops, pay attention to policy decisions, agreements, or actions debated in your church, community, state, nation, or in the larger world, and consider these questions:

- What are the moral and ethical statements put forward to support particular policies, agreements, or actions?
- How often do such statements weigh the comfort of the majority as the greater good? What argument could be made for another measure of the greater good, for instance, the greatest good for the greatest number?
- In what ways does the process of adopting or changing laws, policies, or agreements reflect utilitarian thinking?

Notice times when you make a decision based on the premise that your decision will create an outcome that offers the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In those moments, ask yourself who is defining "good," and for whom. Who gets to say what is "good?" Who counts?