

# **Moral Thinking: An Introduction To Values And Ethics**

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**Lecture -17**

**Utilitarianism**

Hello everyone. Today, we are going to talk about Utilitarianism. A theory that you might all have heard of, and what is a class in Ethics, or what is a session in Ethics without a story to start with, or richly embedded with stories. So let me start today with a, not a story, but a real life situation, where we can bring out the theory here. Let us say then, Dams. Now in India, dams long back, had been regarded as the, as a saviour of the people.

Right. Damming a river. When you dam a river, when you build a dam on a river, you solve certain problems. What do you solve? Well, you bring about irrigation, to a lot of area.

You bring drinking water, potable water supply, to a lot of areas. You enhance the spread of the river. You spread it across the year. Because, when you dam a river, you hold on to the water. And even in the dry season, there is a significant amount of water left, definitely more than what would have usually been left, if the flow of water would be fine.

Right. Dams, at one time in India, seem to be, and I am sure this is true for any country of the world, seem to be a solution, to a lot of problems. It was a miracle of science. It was something that, took away the fundamental troubles, that affected societies and countries, like droughts, like erratic water supply, insufficient water supply, taking water to places which are dry lands. So, it almost changes the topography of the land, for better.

Now, till now, the description of a dam is of a saviour. Right. Now, what happens, when a river is dammed. A river is dammed generally in a gorge, or a place where there is water. And the moment the river is dammed, the river spreads before the dam.

Right. Submerges a lot of land, which was on the banks of the river. Right. So, I am sure, you would know that, if this is the river, and we build a dam here, these areas, lands that are around, if this is the river, and this is the direction of flow, this is where the dam is created. And these areas will be submerged.

Right. Just as good as a philosopher can sketch out a topographical diagram. Here it is for you. Now, when these areas get submerged, what happens there. The vegetation is lost. They all go under water.

Villages go under water. Right. So, they are given a compensation. Generally, how it has played out in India, especially in all the major dams. The people out here are relocated.

Relocated to other parts. They are given lands in other parts, adjoining parts, or different parts. They are given monetary compensation. And so that, when the dam is complete, and the river rises, and these areas are submerged. No life is lost.

And, there is a resettlement of these people there. Now, let us look at the third option, or the third point in the story. Now, these people who are relocated, they have been probably staying here, for ages, and for centuries. And if somebody wishes, or some village wishes, not to be relocated, what should we be doing. What should we, as society, as government, as a nation, as a parliament, what should we be doing.

Right. Let me, attack some numbers to it, so that it gives you a scale. Right. So, here is a, say a 5000 people, who are relocated. And this dam benefits, directly or indirectly, a 100000 people, may be even more. Directly, say 100000 people, indirectly even more.

Because, you can look at hydroelectric power, you can look at extended irrigation, and their consequences effects, that can have of damming a river. Right. And, I am still not taking into the ecological problems, that are coming into the picture. Right. Because, these are also species, that will go underground, under water.

And, will of course, we take care, so that, as much, as little damage as possible, and as much relocation as possible, takes place. Right. But, let us put it, in the human denominator today. So, we have 5000 people here, who have to be relocated. And 100000 people, who are directly benefited by this dam.

Right. And these 5000 people, say 1000 of them, or even 5000 of them, do not want to relocate. They do not want to leave their ancestral land, or their village, at whatever price, they do not want to relocate and leave. Right. This is a scenario, that plays out in

various fields. Be it mines, be it different types of minerals, mining, land acquisition for manufacturing.

Especially, in populated countries, this is quite a possible. It is a scenario, that plays out in many, many places. Right. And, there can be many modern day versions of it also. Not that, this is an, a very old version, because this also still goes through.

So, we must have heard of, Narmada Bajawandolan, and various movements that come across, come across the building of dams, in various parts of the country. Now, half a century back, building a dam in India, was a breeze, people. It was a no-brainer, it was a clear consensus. But, today, or even decade or two back, onwards, it is difficult to build dams. And, the ecological disbalance is one of the problems.

But, the other problem is, the rights of people. So, these 5000 people, who are to be relocated, if they do not wish to be relocated, can they be sacrificed for these 100,000 people. Right. Can their wishes, can their autonomy, can their choices be sacrificed, for the flourishing, or the welfare of these 100,000 people. If your answer is yes, to this, then you are taking a Utilitarian strain.

If your answer is no to this, then you are taking a Deontological strain. Utilitarianism is a part of Consequentialism. And, in Consequentialism, as we have discussed, it is a theory bereft of content. Utilitarianism provides it, that content.

And, what is that content. That content is utility. Right. Loosely translated into happiness. So, what is the utility. The utility of these 5000 people, versus the utility of these 100,000 people.

Right. Can we make a comparison between this. As a Utilitarian, yes, we can make a comparison. As a Deontologist, or as a Non-Consequentialist, we cannot make a comparison, assigning weightage only to the sheer number of people. Right. This is basically, the debate that comes around, the Utilitarian Theory of Ethics.

Right. So, when we look at, can the 5000 people, who are to be relocated, be sacrificed in that sense, for the well-being of the 100,000 people. Sacrifice instance, it is not a threat to their life. But, it is a change in their livelihood, in their habitat, which they do not desire. Or, let us assume, they are being forcibly relocated. Now, here is what Utilitarianism stands as a theory, that anything that brings about the maximum happiness, to the maximum number of people, becomes the guide to the action.

Right. So, let me read out, what is Utilitarian, from the Cambridge dictionary of

Philosophy. The moral theory, that an action is morally right, if and only if, it produces at least, as much good or utility, for all people affected by the action, as any alternative action, the person could do instead. Right. So, simplistically put, any action, how do you judge an action, as right or wrong, as desirable or undesirable, on the moral component. You judge it, on the basis of, how much happiness does it create to, how many people.

The greatest happiness of the greatest number, that as the guiding principle, is the philosophy of Utilitarianism, as an Ethical Theory. That anything, or to decide, what is right or wrong, or what is the direction to be taken, or not. The greatest happiness, for the greatest number, is the guiding principle. And that is what, is the core, or the theory of Utilitarianism.

J S Mill, and James Bentham. These are two proponents, who are frequently associated with, the foundations of Utilitarianism. And J S Mill articulated it, as the greatest happiness principle, or which is also called the principle of utility. Right. Okay. So, now we have some idea about, Utilitarianism.

So, what is utility. Utility as happiness. And, that brings the maximum utility to, the maximum number of people, as the core of Utilitarianism. Right. Now, let us proceed to say, how is Utilitarianism connected with Hedonism. Early Utilitarians held variations of Hedonism. But, the important thing that, you should note is that, Utilitarianism can be seen, into two parts.

It is a consequentialist principle. Because, it looks at consequences, what are the effects of the decision. And, the nature of those effects, follow the Hedonic aspect, or the Hedonism aspect, that it brings about the maximum utility. Right. Again, as we talked about, as we spoke about in the earlier versions, that when we talked about Hedonism, that the pleasure itself can be a very porous term, a very vague term, or a very wide term, that needs to be defined. And, as usual, we are encountering, as usual, Utilitarianism divides into various schools, depending on how people have defined or understood utility.

Right. So, we are engaging with Utilitarianism, as an introductory ethical theory. But, these are robust big theories, which are sophisticated and developed, when one looks at, how one arrives at the definition of utility, what one holds at, as utility. Right. Just as, we had seen that, pleasure in case of Hedonism, can be defined in, or can be understood articulated in different ways. And, depending on how it is articulated, the theory stands as refined, or crude, or initial, or whatever name it is called for.

Right. Let us say, here I would like to bring that well, Bentham, as an Utilitarian. Right. James Bentham, as a Philosopher and a Utilitarian, has gone ahead, and tried to develop the theory of Utilitarianism, by bringing out something called the, Felicific Calculus. What is the Felicific Calculus, I read. The alleged possibility of computing, the value of units of happiness, associated with the Utilitarianism of Bentham.

Right. So, let me go back. Yes. So, imagine now, this may seem fancy, this may seem impractical, this may seem strange. But, if you look at it this way, and particularly, if you look at nations, states, and democratic governments, they are generally Utilitarians. Now, how does a democratic government decide, on what is the right thing to do. Right. So, Bentham has gone ahead, and proposed a Felicific Calculus, that we can actually go ahead, and try to calculate the units of happiness, that come from one kind of act, and the units of happiness, that could come from another kind of act.

It is not as impractical, or as strange as it sounds. Because, one has to take macro decisions, right. Whether we dam River X, or we dam River Y. Whether, we invest in Defence, or whether we invest in Space Research. So, how does one take these decisions. Now, one way is to have an intuitive, or a subjective understanding of, well, what is valuable than the other.

The Utilitarians have gone ahead, and tried to make a very numerical quantitative procedure, by which one can calculate the units of happiness. So, they go ahead and make their assumptions, that how many people it affects. And, if each person is given one unit of utility, then one gets to calculate the utility here. Now, that seems strange, and this is quite an old way of looking at things. But nevertheless, this is the first step, that Utilitarians took.

Right. So, the Felicific Calculus was an attempt to calculate the utility, from two competing acts, and then deciding on, which particular decision, or which particular act should be pursued. Right. This particularly makes sense, in the realm of macro decisions, in the realm of governments, in the realm of collectives, institutions, companies.

But also, when individuals take a decision. Right. When you look at, what is a decision that can bring maximum utility to you. So, when it is an, for an individual, well, Utilitarianism and its description of Hedonic component, coincide, and it becomes a Hedonistic principle, in any case. But especially, Utilitarianism holds, when the number of people affected, are large. Once there is a large number of people affected, then Utilitarianism comes into play.

So, let me read out. Utilitarianism as a universal teleological principle, that calls for the maximisation of goodness in society, or put in another way, the goodness of the greatest number. Right. So, if I put in here, it is a principle. And what is teleology.

That is, teleology can be understood as purpose. And you need to understand it, as the same thing as, Consequentialism. Right. Teleology is purpose, and it is same as Consequentialism. So, the teleology of a system is, what is the purpose towards which it is designed.

This originates from the word, Telos, which means, purpose. Right. And, this is also seen as a contrast to Deontology. So, teleology and Consequentialism, you may consider as the same kinds of orientation of moral theories. So, Utilitarianism as a universal teleological principle.

What is universal about it. Universal, because it concerns a large bulk of people. A universal teleological principle, that calls for the maximisation of goodness in society. Society is crucial here. So, it is a social principle. Or, put another way, it is the greatest goodness, for the greatest number.

Now, let me think of it. Let me introduce an example, frequently given in Utilitarian Literature. Another story, that will help you understand your position, help you understand Utilitarianism, per say. Two people are in a raft, from a shipwreck.

And they are floating in the sea. And, they are waiting to be rescued. And, they are without food. And then, they discover that, there is some provisions left. But, those provisions, or that food that left, will only be sufficient for one of the two people.

Right. Now, how do they decide, who is the one, who will survive. Or, who will consume the food, and have a better chance of survival, by being rescued. Right. It is a skewed situation. It is hopefully, does not occur to anybody, and rarely does occur.

But, in case it occurs, it is nevertheless a situation. But, more important than the reality of the situation, it is the way we think about the situation helps us, understand our position, or our theory, on that particular position, situation. So, now here is the theory, that we have a raft, a raft with two people, a raft out there in the sea, which is from a shipwreck. And now, two people who are surviving on a raft, waiting to be rescued.

And, there is provisions only for one to survive. Right. If, one of them is a scientist, and in mind has the potential cure for cancer, whereas the other person is a rather undistinguished person. And therefore, within them, or they need to decide, or you need

to decide, or how does one decide, whether the food should be divided equally, or who should be using the provisions, whether it should be sacrificed for the scientist, or the undistinguished person, or they do a toss, or they split it, or they fight it out. How is this to be sorted, or what is a fair principle of sorting this, will determine what kind of a theory, one holds as an evidence of, or an instance of fairness. So, to the Utilitarian, it is a clear answer.

To the Utilitarian, the answer is, as many of you might have guessed. The scientist, who is shipwrecked in the raft, deserves, or should be taking the provisions, to better his chance, or her chance of survival, over the other person. Because, the scientist has a possible cure for cancer, which can in effect, affect a lot of people around. And therefore, the maximisation of utility, comes from the survival, or the possibility of the maximisation of the utility, for maximum number, comes from betting on the survival of the scientist, rather than the other, rather undistinguished person. Right. But, if some of you feel that, that is a kind of unfair, or even a cruel way to take a decision, well, then your intuitions are more deontological, or definitely not Utilitarian, or Anti-Utilitarian.

Because, Utilitarian very often comes in the form of a ruthless preference, to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. And these are cruel decisions, that societies, government, states, families, have to take. Right. So, I am sure, you can think of many other examples, in the times of partition, when families had to take decisions on, how, who to survive, who will move, who will not move. These are all times, which are not just traumatic times, but also times, where decisions have to be taken, and very often they are taken on, Utilitarian means.

Right. So, imagine a fighter jet, which has got fire, and has to crash land. Now, that fighter jet will choose, has to crash land on villages, that are down below. And then, the pilot will have to choose, or may have been instructed to choose the place, where the least population exists. But, in that sense, is not the least populated village, being punished, for being the least populated. Right. That, somewhere, the Utilitarian methodology of decision making, is being unfair, to the minority.

That well, because they are less populated village, therefore the pilot seeks to crash land, on that particular village. So, there are numerous examples, that you can think of, especially macro decisions, that one has to make. Here, there is a clear contrast between, utility, and the notion of rights. Right. Because, Utilitarianism can also shrink into Majoritarianism, or can turn into Majoritarianism, without the notion of rights.

So, the notion of rights are important, to protect the minority. That, even though, this is a village of 5000 people, they have rights to their land, and cannot be relocated. So, you

can look at the notion of human rights. Human rights are also against the ethos of Utilitarianism, very easily. But, we will see how, even that can be accommodated in the notion of utility. So, one question that occurs is that, is utility the same across individuals, or does it vary.

So, one assumption of Utilitarianism is that, first citizens happen, second citizens happen, third citizens happen, or utility of citizen A, citizen B, citizen C, are all the same. But that, is that the case. Because, agency also varies. Now, some people have higher faculties, and higher demand for being satisfied.

Some people are being easily satisfied. How do you actually look at, can you normalise, and consider each individual person's utility, same as the other utility. It is not an answer that I am giving you. But, it is a question I am leaving you with, to think over it, and to perhaps even comment, or write on it. There can be so many examples. Another example, that occurs to me, that well, a patient in a terminal state of illness, can forcibly have his or her organs harvested, to maybe help four, five people, who require those organs, to come back to life.

It sounds like a cruel example. But, these are difficult choices, that have to be made. And when it is a Utilitarian principle on way, say a war time medic, a war time doctor, has to make a choice, that well, there is tremendous demand. People are getting wounded, soldiers are getting wounded, and coming to the hospital. And the doctor cannot pay equal attention to all of them. So, the doctor has to make a choice, on whom will that attention be. I am sure, they will have their own guidelines, which are thought through, and some of them, might be downright Utilitarian, that who has the highest chance of survival, who has the least consumption of medical supplies required.

So, they have their algorithm, to take these decisions, and not making them decisions, to be taken on an instant. But, the principle being ingrained, so that the decision to be taken on the instant, becomes easier. And, that is the importance of moral theorising, that the more you theorise in peace, the more clear your principles are. And therefore, you can take a decision in the time of need, without contemplating, at the moment where decision needs to be taken. So finally, let us just sum up, by coming across two kinds of Utilitarianism, that you must be aware of.

Act and Rule Utilitarianism. This is similar to the Act and Rule Consequentialism. Let me read out. Act Utilitarians say that, we ought ideally to apply the principle, to all of the alternatives open to us, at any given moment. What does this mean? That, there are no need to just stick to rules. But, we need to apply the principle, to all alternatives open to us. That means, to evaluate actions, to evaluate acts, which are available to us, and to



look at the consequences, that each act will bring about, the highest utility that each act will give about, at any moment, and then decide on the action.

This will be even clearer, when we look at, what is Rule Utilitarians. Rule Utilitarians, on the other hand, state that an act is right, if it confirms to a valid rule, within a system of rules, that if followed, will result in the best possible state of affairs. Here again, it is close to an non-consequentialism. Because, it looks at, an act is right, if it confirms to a valid rule. What is a valid rule? A valid rule, within a system of rules, is that which brings about, the best possible state of affairs.

So, for instance, as we talked about in Hedonism, if we look at Truth Telling. Truth Telling is important, or Promise Keeping is important, or Breaking a Contract, is punishable, as a rule is because, keeping one's commitments, keeps the overall system stable. People can believe and work with each other, only if people keep their contracts. And, if they do not keep their contracts, they are liable to be punished. So, a rule of contract keeping, or promise keeping, is to be followed, to result in the best possible state of affairs.

Right. And, the readings here are, Poimen and Pfizer's Ethical Theory, Classical and Contemporary Reading. So, if you could read these particular pages, have a brilliant introduction to Utilitarianism, that will clear your understanding of Utilitarianism. So, by now, you should be able to define, what Utilitarianism is. You should be able to, as is the grain of the course, look at situations, policies, laws, decisions, and abstract, what is the Moral Theory being followed. So, you should be able to see a decision, or once you experience a situation, or see a decision, you can abstract, what is the Moral Theory being followed. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.