The Utilitarian Approach

Chapter 7, Elements of Moral Philosophy
James Rachels
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Outline

- The Revolution in Ethics
- First Example: Euthanasia
- Second Example: Nonhuman Animals
Revolution
91, 92 “Morality, [Bentham] urged, is not a matter of pleasing God, nor is it a matter of faithfulness to abstract rules.
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Morality is just the attempt to bring about as much happiness as possible in this world.”
Euthanasia
93 Matthew Donnelly because of damage brought about by radiation, was in constant pain and requested of his brothers that they would kill him.
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Euthanasia

93 Matthew Donnelly because of damage brought about by radiation, was in constant pain and requested of his brothers that they would kill him.

Harold, his brother, did the deed.

Did Harold do wrong?
Euthanasia
Euthanasia

Christianity holds that life is a gift of God and only God may take it from us.
Euthanasia

- Christianity holds that life is a gift of God and only God may take it from us.
- This is formulated in what Nielsen called traditional morality: “The intentional killing of innocent people is always wrong.”
Euthanasia

Considering Harold’s choices, what decision would produce the greatest overall happiness for Matthew and everyone else concerned?
Euthanasia

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The utilitarian conception depends on no theological conceptions or inflexible rules.
Euthanasia
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95 The benevolence of God is called into question if God does not permit the killing of Matthew but rather wants him to continue suffering for a whole year.
Euthanasia

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“This would be exactly what Bentham means by ‘calling him benevolent in words, but not meaning that he is so in reality.’”
Euthanasia
95 The moral and legal tradition do not agree with Bentham.
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96 If, however, “on the utilitarian view, euthanasia is moral, should it also be made legal?”
Euthanasia
Rachels asks what the purpose of the law ought to be.
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Bentham thought the purpose of the law is the same as that of morals: “It should promote the general welfare of all citizens.”
Euthanasia
“For the classical utilitarians, laws prohibiting euthanasia are not only contrary to the general welfare, they are also unjustifiable restrictions on people’s right to control their own lives.”
Euthanasia

“For the classical utilitarians, laws prohibiting euthanasia are not only contrary to the general welfare, they are also unjustifiable restrictions on people’s right to control their own lives.”

On this account, no harm was done to Matthew Donnelly when his brother Harold killed him.
Nonhuman Animals
Nonhuman Animals

97 St. Thomas summed up the traditional Christian view of animals:
Nonhuman Animals

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In the divine order animals are intended for man’s use. So it is not wrong for man to make any use of animals he wishes, including killing them.
Nonhuman Animals
Nonhuman Animals

97 Thomas admitted it was wrong to be cruel to animals, but only as it affects man.
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People and animals are in separate moral categories.
Nonhuman Animals

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People and animals are in separate moral categories.

Animals have no moral standing.
Nonhuman Animals
Nonhuman Animals

98 On a utilitarian view it doesn't matter that a being doesn't have a soul, or reason, etc.
Nonhuman Animals

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“All that matters is whether he is capable of experiencing happiness and unhappiness, pleasure and pain.”
Nonhuman Animals

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“All that matters is whether he is capable of experiencing happiness and unhappiness, pleasure and pain.”

If an individual can suffer, then that individual must not be discounted in the moral equation.
98 We have the same reason for not mistreating nonhuman animals and humans. They can suffer.
Nonhuman Animals

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Mistreatment is wrong for the same reasons.
Nonhuman Animals

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Mistreatment is wrong for the same reasons.

But the traditional view gives animals no moral standing at all.
Nonhuman Animals
Nonhuman Animals

Peter Singer asks how we can possibly justify experiments on animals.
Nonhuman Animals

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Experiment pg 99-100
Nonhuman Animals

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The utilitarian argument is simple:
Nonhuman Animals

Peter Singer asks how we can possibly justify experiments on animals.

The utilitarian argument is simple:

We should judge actions right or wrong depending on whether they cause more happiness or unhappiness.
Nonhuman Animals
Nonhuman Animals

100 Each experiment is to be judged on its own merits.
Nonhuman Animals

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“The utilitarian principle does not, by itself, tell us what the truth is about particular experiments; but it does insist that the harm done to the animals requires justification.”
Nonhuman Animals

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“The utilitarian principle does not, by itself, tell us what the truth is about particular experiments; but it does insist that the harm done to the animals requires justification.”

We can’t assume that because they are not human that anything goes.
Nonhuman Animals
Nonhuman Animals

How about eating meat? Is that also wrong if the animals are treated well enough up to the time of slaughter.
Nonhuman Animals

How about eating meat? Is that also wrong if the animals are treated well enough up to the time of slaughter.

- Calves are mistreated to produce veal.
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Calves are mistreated to produce veal.

The system of meat production causes great suffering to the animals.
Nonhuman Animals
Because we can eat vegetarian meals that are nutritious and satisfying, the good that is done by slaughtering for meat does not outweigh the bad.
Nonhuman Animals
Nonhuman Animals

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Utilitarianism challenges the basic assumption that humans alone are worthy of moral consideration.
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Utilitarianism challenges the basic assumption that humans alone are worthy of moral consideration.

Morality must acknowledge that we are not the only species inhabiting this planet.