

Thinking Like a Utilitarian

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An old and familiar objection to utilitarianism is that it requires people to always directly apply the principle of maximizing utility in order to make decisions. In response to this objection, writers such as Mill and Sidgwick—and Hare and Railton more recently and systematically—have stressed that although utilitarianism holds that the principle of maximizing utility is the correct criterion of rightness, it does not thereby urge the employment of that principle as a decision procedure. Instead, it recommends that an agent employ whatever decision procedure is the one whose employment, by him or her, will lead to the maximization of utility. This makes the optimal decision procedure for any agent dependent upon complex empirical considerations. To some extent, utilitarian theorists have taken note of these considerations, by pointing out the usefulness of subscribing to general principles (e.g., Mill’s “secondary principles”) and the usefulness of cultivating sincere commitments to values other than the maximization of utility. My paper is an attempt to further characterize—or point to factors that will further determine—the nature of an agent’s optimal decision procedure. Topics I address include (1) the likelihood that Hare’s two-level model, while innovative, is overly restrictive in structure concerning the moral elements of an agent’s ideal decision procedure; (2) the likelihood that an agent’s optimal decision procedure will include non-moral elements such as (a) dispositions to answer certain non-normative questions (e.g., empirical questions) in certain ways and (b) dispositions to act on certain non-moral normative principles (e.g., principles of prudence); (3) the optimal balance between following rules for particular situations and setting them aside when they do not serve the purpose that provides the rationale for them, (4) relatedly, the role of the principle of maximizing utility as an element of (and not just as a determinant of) an agent’s optimal decision procedure; (5) the disposition to monitor and adjust one’s decision procedure on an ongoing basis; and (6) the fact that although different decision procedures may be optimal for different agents, optimality of a particular decision procedure for any given agent will depend, in part, on the extent to which his or her decision procedure effectively complements the decision procedures of other agents with whom he or she interacts.