UTILITARIANISM

I. Utilitarianism was as radical a moral theory as theories proposed by Marx, Darwin and Freud. It is best understood, not just for what it does but for what it leaves out. Most tellingly, it leaves out God. No longer, according to Bentham or Mill, should we act simply because God commanded we act in this way or that or simply because God said so, or God said so through one of God's representatives here on earth. Utilitarianism eliminated all references to God and religion and focused instead on the happiness of human beings. No longer were persons to look to abstract rules "written in the heavens" to guide their moral conduct. Morality is not faith or devotion to God's will or God's commandments. The sole concern of morality is the promotion of the happiness of human beings here on earth and we are required - from a moral point of view - to act so as to bring about that happiness.

II. The Principle of Utility:

By the Principle of Utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question; or what is the same thing in other words, to promote or oppose that happiness.

— Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832),
The Principles of Morals and Legislation

III. The Greatest Happiness Principle:

According to the Greatest Happiness Principle . . . the ultimate end, with reference to and 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.

— John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Utilitarianism (1861)

IV. Test Cases: Euthanasia and Animal Rights: The Christian view has traditionally held that life is a gift from God and only God may decide when it shall end. Utilitarianism urges an alternative approach: what action will bring about the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness for all concerned. So, too, the Christian tradition has held that God made human beings in God's image and only human beings have souls. Humans can use animals to their benefit. Utilitarians take a different approach. What matters in distinguishing right from wrong is the balance of happiness over unhappiness. Since animals can and do suffer pain, the suffering of animals must be taken into account in determining if and when an action is right.