



NEUROETHICS

RESOURCES FOR SECONDARY EDUCATORS

4.1

Consequentialism/Utilitarianism

Bill thinks that the act of disconnecting his father's respirator is wrong because it is an example of a forbidden act – the killing of innocent persons. Jake, on the other hand, is more interested in the consequences of the action than in its form or kind. He wants to consider how all involved would be affected by (1) disconnecting the respirator and (2) leaving it connected. Jake advocates taking the action with the best outcome for everyone involved. Jake is a consequentialist.

Consequentialist ethical theories determine the rightness or wrongness of an action by its consequences rather than by the type of action it is. They define the right in terms of the good. The right action is the one that produces the most good. This begs the question, "What is good?" The most widely supported version of consequentialism is called utilitarianism. Utilitarians consider happiness (pleasure or well-being) to be the only thing that is good in and of itself – the only thing that has *intrinsic* value. Utilitarians strive to follow the *greatest happiness principle*: act so as to produce the greatest overall happiness.

For the Cleavers to determine the right thing to do, according to this principle, they must perform the following utilitarian calculus:

1. Identify the feasible courses of action.
2. Calculate the sum of "utility" (pleasure and pain) associated with each action for everyone affected.
3. Choose the action that will result in the greatest amount of utility - the greatest happiness, everyone considered.

