

## Asses Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory of morality (contrasted with a deontological theory). This means that it bases the moral weight of actions on its consequences, not on the intention (as in deontology). For example, if I was to buy my friend some food I thought he didn't like to annoy him, but it then turned out that it was his favourite food, then that would be a moral act. I think that in many ways Utilitarianism is a good theory, but I disagree with many of the points, as I shall outline.

Utilitarianism was first thought of by Jeremy Bentham, and put to paper in his book, 'An Introduction To The Principles Of Morality' in 1780. He stated that "the sole principle that we ought to live and judge others by is utility." His theory was that humans are by nature hedonistic, i.e. we live to find pleasure and avoid pain. From this he drew "The Principle of Utility", which was the "Greatest Happiness" principle. This meant that we must follow a moral system that maximises pleasure and minimises pain for ourselves and our community, because psychological hedonism would imply ethical hedonism.

In order to work out the morality of an act, Bentham devised a "Utility Calculus", which was meant to be an easy way to make a moral decision. The problem was that it was anything but simple.

The calculus was composed of five steps:

1. Determine the amount of pleasure and pain brought to the person most directly affected by your action, by measuring the intensity, duration, certainty and remoteness of the pleasure/pain.
2. Examine the effects of this pleasure/pain, including its fecundity (tendency to produce other pleasures/pain), and it's purity (its tendency to produce ~~only~~ pleasure or ~~only~~ pain).
3. Consider the extent of the pleasure/pain onto other people.
4. Calculate the total pleasure/pain units.
5. Repeat steps 1-4 for every action, and choose the ones which produce the most pleasure and the least pain.

There are several obvious flaws with this calculus. First of all, it's all extremely vague. Most of these variables, such as intensity, are relative. What units could you use? There is no way that two people will get the same result from this calculus, which is the whole point. Using this, there could never be any set morals. Also, the calculus ignores the quality of pleasures, only concerning itself with quantity. Surely some pleasures are greater than others (a point made by John Stuart Mill, as I shall get onto)?

Is there a single sensation known as 'pleasure'? Are they just not sensations which we enjoy, but of which none are the same? Aristotle made this point, suggesting that "pain is not a single sensation", which would completely flatten this theory.

Finally, how do we know what consequences are actually relevant to the morality of an act? How can we possibly predict what will happen after we perform an act?

These criticisms all add up to make this theory very vague and overcomplicated. I support certain elements of it, such as the fact that it's humane and takes emotion strongly into account.

Bentham's Utilitarianism is known as 'Act Utilitarianism', because it focuses on individual acts, and that every situation should be approached differently. It's quite weak since its lack of rules seem to make it lose its very definition as a moral theory, since they should be based on set rules (although maximise happiness may be that rule). Also, an act can be considered right/wrong completely independently of pleasure/pain. There are other things which can define the morality of an act. The theory also assumes that all beings are equal, though in reality personal relationships will alter this drastically (given the choice, you would save a family member from death over a stranger). I believe this theory is far too weak, vague and imprecise to be of any real use, and its apparent simplicity is non-existent.

John Stuart Mill attempted to solve many of these problems with his modifications on the theory. Raised as a strict utilitarian, he had his whole life to experience its weaknesses first hand, and came up with some very clever solutions for the criticisms above. First of all, he started to make the point that all pleasures are not equal; he introduced higher and lower pleasures to account for this. However, he doesn't specify what pleasures are higher and what pleasures are lower, so it's hard to put this into practice. He does, however, make the point that intellectual pleasures are higher than those of the body. This, unfortunately, makes the theory rather elitist (much like Plato's and Aristotle's ideas were; in fact, Mill borrows a lot of ideas from Aristotle in particular). He stated that "It is better to be Socrates unsatisfied than a fool satisfied", indicating that you cannot ever be truly happy without intellect, and that your mind will always be more important than your body.

Mill also introduced the idea of 'secondary principles' which were to guide our decisions and aid the greatest happiness principle. These principles are rules of sorts, fixing many of the vague gaps left by Bentham's theory. These rules tend to, from experience, produce the greatest happiness. However, breaking these rules may sometimes produce increased happiness, which is the greatest flaw of this theory. Two examples of rules are "do not encroach the rights of others" and "do not lie, deceive

or cause injury to others." These would, most of the time, cause happiness. The introduction of rules makes this a stronger theory, since it combines the best elements of consequentialist and deontological theories into one, and avoids the complex calculation set down by Bentham.

This theory is called Rule Utilitarianism, since it focuses on rules rather than individual acts. Where Act Utilitarianism takes each act individually, Rule Utilitarianism is much more general. However, the introduction of higher/lower pleasures by Mill complicates an already complicated concept, when the whole idea was to simplify it. It is also impossible to define these higher or lower pleasures, meaning the theory is still quite vague, and doesn't quite hold up as a moral theory (as criticised by David Hume and G.E. Moore).

There have been several modern adaptations of Utilitarianism, including the split between positive and negative. Positive focuses on increasing happiness, whilst negative aims to decrease unhappiness, lending a certain flexibility.

Henry Sidgwick proposed Ideal Utilitarianism, where he introduced other principles or values to the greatest happiness principles, such as justice or generosity (making this akin to a theory of virtue). However, this does mean abandoning strict hedonism, which lies at the foundation of Utilitarianism. Moore did agree with this theory, acknowledging that "good cannot be defined purely by happiness or pleasure."

The final theory, and the one which I most prefer within Utilitarianism is Preference Utilitarianism. Peter Singer is generally regarded as the father of this theory, with influence from R. M. Hare. It is the most popular contemporary theory of Utilitarianism, and it is understandable since it is the most purely moral, and in many ways modern theory. It is based not on producing the greatest happiness, but instead on maximising the satisfaction of all people involved. Its aim is to fulfil the preferences of people, not just their happiness (since this is difficult to define). This makes it very strong as it is individual and almost guarantees an obviously moral decision in most situations. There are no real flaws with this theory as such, apart from the criticisms of hedonism as a whole, which are outlined below.

These criticisms were outlined long before Jeremy Bentham introduced Utilitarianism, by Aristotle. He questioned whether humans are, by nature, actually hedonistic? Do we really live only for pleasure? This seems hard to believe. He also stated (as mentioned before), that there is "no single sensation of pleasure," which makes a lot of Utilitarianism completely irrelevant. The final, most important point, and one which makes Utilitarianism crumble under itself is something pointed out in particular by Karl

Marx: Psychological Hedonism (which Utilitarianism is based on) is self-defining, i.e. it tells us nothing. If hedonism is true then we can define pleasure as 'what we seek.' Therefore 'we seek pleasure' merely means 'we seek what we seek' – this tells us nothing. Similarly, 'we don't seek what we seek' is a contradiction. This is the main reason why I consider Utilitarianism to be inadequate as a moral theory, with the possible exception of Preference Utilitarianism, which is why that is the only theory that I can agree with.