

**What are the advantages of utilitarianism? Identify the main problems of utilitarianism. To what extent do these make utilitarianism unacceptable?**

The ethical theory of Utilitarianism, derived from the word *Utility* was developed by Jeremy Bentham in the nineteenth-century who aspired to establish a universal theory which could be applied to all ethical situations. It is a teleological theory of ethics, which says that the moral value of any action can be solely judged by the most probable consequences of the action. It does not take into account motives or the intrinsic rightness of any action. This principle claims that an action should be chosen by way of its *usefulness* to a situation or 'The greatest good for the greatest number' originally coined by Francis Hutcheson. Bentham argued that the potential usefulness ('Good' or 'Pleasure') of a situation could be 'calculated' in order to reach correct decisions within ethical situations, that would lead to the greater number of persons receiving the largest amounts of pleasure. He proposed the Hedonic Calculus which took into consideration the intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity and extent of any given action in an ethical situation. It was John Stuart Mill who argued that there are different levels of happiness, and pleasures of the mind should be of more value to a person than physical pleasure. He said 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied'

Often in moral situations people tend to be subjective and personal preference can not always be relied upon to be the most beneficent to all parties involved. Utilitarianism is objective and works towards consideration of consequences and the idea that human well being is *intrinsically good*, and any means by which people can come to this state of being is morally right.

Atheists who practice this theory agree that it coincides with another famous ethical rule, often referred to as The Golden Rule in Christianity - 'Do to others, as you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7:12)

Utilitarianism promotes a democratic approach to making decisions and it is the majority's interests that are always taken into account, no other minorities are allowed to dominate.

Because of the teleological nature of this theory, Utilitarianism only considers the situation at hand, and does not assume the same choice for different situations. Using Utilitarianism, abortion could be right for one woman and wrong for another, both who would be faced by the same problem but in different situations. An opposing deontological theory would argue that abortion would be wrong in every single situation because it is morally wrong to have an abortion per se.

Unlike many other theories, Utilitarianism is a simple and straightforward theory it does not depend on controversial or unverifiable claims and could be adapted to suit all kinds of perspectives, religious or non-religious.

The most dominant weakness of this theory is its pressure to predict long-term consequences of actions and to predict correctly every time. Although some actions can be judged and decided upon based on past experiences there is never a guarantee that circumstances will be the same every time. A president, who decides to continue with his predecessor's fifty-year-old law that racism is acceptable, based on the success of it in his time, may find that in his day and age, his society is different and will not accept the law the same way as previously. The consequences of the enforcement of that law could be catastrophic.

Utilitarianism takes no note of motivation and not all actions that are made with good intentions have good consequences, if there is a good attitude behind an action it is not credited by Utilitarianism. Perhaps man X buys the object of his affections flowers, without knowing she has a severe case of hayfever and on receiving the flowers she has to be rushed to hospital. Clearly the intentions of the man were pure and good and he intentionally wanted to make her

happy but instead he put her into anaphylactic shock. Under utilitarian theory his intentions would not be considered no matter how pure or good, the action was wrong and caused the least pleasure for the least amount of people.

With the idea of the 'majority rules' one can never assume the majority want 'good'. If the majority of people agreed with rape and believed it should be made legal, it would be made legal under Utilitarianism theory and the minority would have no say in the situation. Minorities are disregarded where Utilitarianism is present, so values such as justice have no place if not respected by the majority.

Utilitarianism is simple but perhaps too idealistic to be put into proper practice. Human beings have prima facie duties to those people whom we love and are connected to in some way, Utilitarianism does not allow personal relationships. Although a mother would be drawn to save her own child from a burning building, if there was also a scientist amongst the fire with the cure for cancer, Utilitarian theory would insist that the woman save the scientist as opposed to her own child.

Religious believers would agree that humans have been motivated to endure pain and suffering for something they believe to be right and think it is an offence to simply opt for an easy road to happiness and self fulfillment. *'Imagine the case of Joan of Arc. It is hardly credible that she was experiencing pleasure as she stood at the stake and the flames began to rise around her body...It seems more plausible that she was experiencing pain for the sake of something she valued more highly than pleasure'* (Horner and Westacott, 2000). Many believe it is up to God to bring about the best possible outcomes of situations, not humans.

Utilitarianism promotes a hierarchy of pleasure and pain. Can anyone argue that one person's pleasure is more valid than another's? Or that one person's problem is more important than someone else's? Although some argue that quantity can be measured (Hedonic Calculus) there is no valid way in which people can measure quality of emotion.

Utilitarianism seems on face value to be a practical theory of ethics but is hard to put into practice due to the nature of human beings. Many people disagree with attitudes and ideas that contradict those that humans are 'designed' for. If a mother can not save her own child from a burning fire for the sake of a stranger surely this asks humans to go against natural human instinct, breaks the bond between mother and child and would more likely than not encourage feelings of resentment and bitterness.

This form of Utilitarianism often referred to as 'Act Utilitarianism' or 'Classical Utilitarianism' met many criticisms in its day and has been refined many times over by many ethicists. It was John Stuart Mill however who developed 'Rule Utilitarianism' which holds that there should be specific rules and principles that should be absolute, and from those, actions should be judged accordingly, and happiness will be maximised if everyone follows these rules alike. The idea was that there is general consensus that there must be particular rules that encourage happiness in humans, like respect for others, the keeping of promises or secrets etc. In this form of the theory the rule takes precedence over the action and there can not be any exceptions whereas in Act Utilitarianism if actions promote the general happiness, (no matter what it may be) then rules are framed to embody these. Rule Utilitarianism emphasises equality of everyone in an ethical situation and doesn't allow interests of a particular group to overrule the overall decision.

I believe this theory to be far too simplistic and encouraging of selfishness, as the quest for one's pleasure raises too many unanswered questions. How can pleasure be measured? Can someone correctly predict the consequences of his actions one hundred percent of the time? Is there ever a sure-fire way in which someone can ensure fecundity and purity for not just the immediate recipients of consequences but those who may suffer at second or third hand?