

Utilitarianism

(Weaknesses and strengths)

Utilitarianism states that “an action is right if it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number”. The two greatest promoters and followers of utilitarianism are Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and his student Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Although Mill was the one who perfected the theory, it is Bentham who was the theory’s chief popularizer and an example that people followed. According to Bentham the correct ethical standard is the *principle of utility*, which states that an action should only be done if it brings the maximum amount of happiness to those who are affected by that action. This principle brings about the first concern with utilitarianism because how can you fully decide which people would be affected? The principle of utility only refers to the individual actions by individuals, meaning if more happiness is produced by actions the better the world would be. These actions must be voluntary as the moral responsibility depends on the person concerned having the real choice of whether to perform the action or not. Bentham gave us an illustration of how to choose which action to perform. It goes something like this: if immediate action (A) produces less happiness than future action (B), then you should do B.

i.e. [A = +5 hedons (units of happiness)
B = +7 hedons]

However if B produces more happiness and more unhappiness than A, the unhappiness of B will take away from its happiness, so A will be the best choice if a greater sum total of happiness is produced.

i.e. [A = +5 and -1 = +4 hedons
B = +7 and -4 = +3 hedons]

Although if A and B equaled in the amount of happiness but if A produced more unhappiness then you should choose B.

i.e. [A = +5 and -2 = +3 hedons
B = +5 and -1 = +4 hedons]

Therefore choose the action which produces greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness.

Bentham was a hedonist, believing that pleasure was the sole good and pain was the sole evil, and so it is these experiences that guide the principle of utility. For Bentham an act is only right if it is instrumentally good (quality that leads to pleasure). The moral worth of an action over another action is proportional to the amount/quality of pleasure that one action brings. A more accurate account of the principle of utility would state: *for all those affected by an action, that action is right if it brings pleasure (or prevents pain), and wrong if it brings pain (or prevents pleasure.)*

To assess the quantity of pain and pleasure Bentham introduced the hedonic calculus. He proposed an idea that human pleasures and pains are measurable, and so with the help of “moral arithmetic” actions can be judged either right or wrong. He gives us seven circumstances to measure up to:

1. its intensity (win a mars bar/ winning lottery jackpot)
2. its duration (eating mars bar/using the money)
3. its certainty or uncertainty (how sure are you that eating mars will bring pleasure)

4. nearness in time (how soon the happiness will come)
5. its fruitfulness (quality)
6. its purity (pleasurable action not being followed by pain and vice versa)
7. its extent (number of people that are affected)

“When taking ethical decisions, we should be guided by the principle of utility and not by the rules of social custom or convention”. This is where Bentham’s theory meets difficulties, for example when it allows actions that bring about a big amount of happiness from certain individuals but which are held as morally inexcusable. Imagine that a group of sadistic guards are torturing a prisoner – as their happiness outweighs the prisoner’s pain it would seem to be the right thing to do according to utilitarianism; it seems the action is justified, but that isn’t morally right.

It is important for utilitarians to accept eudaimonism and consequentialism as it is that which guides them on their moral journey and helps to decide which decisions and what actions to take to bring about most good and happiness and therefore be a good utilitarian. Some people however wouldn’t agree with the theory of happiness being the highest good as they would argue that utilitarianism implies that, if a drug was found which had the sole effect of producing happiness, we ought to mass produce and consume it? And, since happiness is just an emotion which can be chemically induced, isn’t it a bit silly to make it the highest order objective? This would have been a major weakness in Bentham’s theory but Mill wouldn’t accept that kind of happiness as it is a low type pleasure (bodily) – it is more harmful to the mind than otherwise. Mill rejects Bentham’s purely quantitative measure of pleasure and replaces it with qualitative one. This also shows that the pleasure experienced by the sadistic guards doesn’t justify their action as the pleasure is of low value and doesn’t outweigh the pain. Mill urges others to pursue the higher pleasures (of the mind), but that has its own problems because we don’t always choose the higher pleasures over the lower e.g. cheating on wife/husband who you love with a sexy lover. According to Mill to solve this type of problem you must become noble, as the noble character leads to the world’s greatest happiness. This noble character can be very hard to achieve though so it’s not a very sufficient solution.

Consequences also play a very important role because decisions are made according to the calculation of those consequences. The rightness of an action depends on its producing the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness and this involves the action’s effects. In most circumstances it is impossible to calculate all the consequences of that action and so it is impossible to know the greatest net happiness produced. You might be able to predict what consequences the action would have in short amount of time but because you can’t predict the future you cannot know all the possible outcomes. An example could be drawn up for this – a doctor saves both a child and mother in a difficult birth. His concluding words are, “You’ll be alright now Mrs. Hitler.” - a utilitarian doctor would think that he would be making a lot of people happy by following the utility principle. The problem, however, is that he couldn’t predict the future, and therefore made the wrong decision because Hitler ended up killing millions of Jews. The doctor couldn’t calculate the consequences of pain he was going to cause and this creates a rather big tear in the utilitarian theory.

Most of us accept the fact that we all have responsibilities to particular people and these responsibilities don’t have to increase any amount of happiness but we do them because we feel it is right to do them. However this is exactly what a utilitarian fails to

notice and accept as important. If, to give another example, there is a burning bus and you are sitting between your mum and a scientist who has discovered a cure for cancer. You can only save one person, who would you save? Most people would save their mother but a utilitarian would be obliged to do the exact opposite because in theory the scientist would create a greater sum of happiness for a greater number than your mother. However this would seem completely immoral and revolting to you as a child who in a way owes everything to their parents.

Utilitarianism does seek to be impartial and this is necessary to any meaningful idea of justice as justice means being impartial and fair to all. Although we are told that we should aim to make everybody happy and count everybody's happiness equally what happens when the greatest amount of happiness is achieved but through an unequal distribution? What if one person is deprived of happiness altogether? This is yet another criticism that utilitarianism faces. According to this a utilitarian judge may be right to condemn an innocent person to death if he believed that a greater good would result – such as restoring law and order, stop an increase in crime etc. by however much this action may maximize the sum total of happiness, it will still be regarded as unjust in the way it is distributed. Justice demands to deal with individuals according to their just deserts and if a person is innocent then their innocence alone is sufficient enough to justify their release. This then shows that if the production of the greatest happiness doesn't imply that justice has been done then deciding what is right or wrong requires more than a mere analysis of effects. A person may not always have the time to think about the consequences and what would be a good decision to make according to the calculations so it is not always useful if you need to make a decision fast for example if there's an accident and you can help save a person in danger but you don't because you need to calculate the consequences. It is not always efficient.

Following absolute rules is not always the best idea because there are certain situations which can arise where it would not be preferable for you to stick by the general rule i.e. in a time of war –to lie about valuable information where the general rule would be 'not to lie'. However generally keeping to those rules would create a pleasant atmosphere because if you didn't have those rules and it was alright for people to lie then everyone would be unhappy because you would never know the truth

Although there are a lot of problems with utilitarianism it does have some strengths. It is simple! You only have one principle to apply: maximize pleasure and minimize suffering. The method of utilitarianism is surprisingly consistent with ethical insights from other moral traditions – including, for instance, Christianity, which also appeals to human beings to love and benefit and avoid to harm others, and promises pay back of happiness in the form of a good feeling in this life and heavens rewards in the afterlife. Utilitarianism claims to be a theory that appeals to common sense. This is certainly strength and an asset for a theory. It is a matter of common sense that if we want to perform moral actions toward people, we should wish to make them happy.– morality should be about stopping suffering and promoting happiness e.g. it is stupid to waste the money on the Yankees and allow thousands of famine victims to die if you have a chance to help. Utilitarianism is not a form of moral egoism – it is not a theory that tells you to put yourself above everyone else. If you did that, you would not be taking into account the benefit or happiness of the greatest possible number of people. Utilitarianism is scientific and impartial – make quantitative measurements and apply the principle of

utility, giving no special treatment to ourselves, or anyone else because of race, gender and religion. It is an objective theory– it affords you a method for calculating how you should act regardless of personal confusion. Unlike most other ethical theories, utilitarianism has the apparent advantage that it includes in its range not only rational – i.e. human – beings, but all sentient beings, which can experience pain and pleasure. So, animals are not left out by utilitarian ethicists and cruelty toward animals can be consistently condemned by utilitarian theory.

I think I have presented a sufficient amount of strengths and weaknesses in the utilitarianism theory to make an educated opinion on whether it is a good theory to follow. Overall the general idea is very good and it makes a lot of sense but it isn't really good enough to judge on the decisions that will affect the rest of your life, but it can work with small decisions e.g. should you have a mars bar all to yourself or share it with another person?

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