

Utilitarianism is an unfair system of ethics which could not work in the twentieth century. Discuss.

Utilitarianism is a moral theory devised by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, which can be best summed up by the phrase “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.” According to utilitarianism, in its various forms, there is no ultimate or absolute goodness, but the best thing to do in a situation is to find a course of action that will lead to the greatest happiness to the greatest number. This is very much a teleological theory, as it involves predicting the consequences and looking for the final outcome. For teleological theories (from the Greek word ‘telos’ meaning end) to work there needs to be some way of measuring how good or bad a consequence is. Utilitarianism is a theory which answers these questions. However, in terms of its linguistic origins it may be more aptly described as a ‘theory of usefulness’, after the Latin word ‘utilis’ meaning useful, which some may accept as true, however, if taken literally, it forms a ridiculous system of ethics.

In order to weigh up the pain and pleasure generated by available moral actions to find the best option, the hedonic calculus, produced by Bentham (1789, Chapter IV, II) is used. It considers seven factors, which are, the intensity of the pleasure, the duration, its certainty or uncertainty, its propinquity or remoteness, its fecundity (or the chance it has if being followed by sensations of the a similar kind), its purity (or the chance of it has not being followed by, sensations of the opposite kind) and its extent (that is, the number of people who affected by it).

A distinction can be drawn between two versions of utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism, more closely associated with Bentham, and rule utilitarianism, associated with Mill. Act utilitarians maintain that, wherever possible, the principle of utility must be directly applied for each individual situation. When faced with a moral choice, I must decide what action will lead to the greatest good in this particular situation. When faced with a moral choice, I must decide what action will lead to the greatest good in this particular situation. Right and wrong, according to a utilitarian, are relative to the people involved and the things which give them happiness. If I'm in a situation in which lying will create the greatest pleasure, then I should lie. If, in the next situation, lying brings about a lesser result than telling the truth, then I should tell the truth. According to act utilitarians, when determining whether the act is right, it is the value or the quality of the consequences of the particular act that count. I may break any law, if in that situation, greater happiness will result. Act utilitarianism has the benefit of flexibility, being able to take into account individual situations at a given moment, although the actions that it justifies can change. The form of utilitarianism is more closely associated with Jeremy Bentham, who is focused on further on.

However, there are a number of criticisms for act utilitarianism, the main fault is that it has the potential to justify virtually any act if, in that particular case, the result generates the most happiness. Another problem is that it's impractical to suggest that we should measure each and every moral choice every time, especially as we may not have all the information required by the hedonic calculus or the simply the time and encourages quite extreme results. If taken literally, all leisure activity would end, as the

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money spent on that activity could cause more people a greater, higher quality pleasure if given to charity, or to a beggar.

Rule utilitarianism focuses on general rules that everyone should follow to bring out the greatest good for that community. Rule utilitarianism establishes the best overall rule by determining the course of action which, when pursued by the whole community, leads to the best result. This form of utilitarianism is more closely associated with John Stuart Mill. I must obey the rule even if it doesn't lead to the greatest pleasure or happiness for me. A rule utilitarian will maintain that I must always drive on the left hand-side of the road in the UK, even in situations in which that doesn't bring about the greatest pleasure for me- such as when I'm in a traffic jam- because that will ensure the greatest good when everyone acts in such a way. I should never lie because, as a general community rule, lying doesn't bring about the greatest good for the community. In each case, the rule takes priority over my immediate situation.

Although rule utilitarianism seems to overcome some of the difficulties encountered in act utilitarianism, as leisure activities wouldn't be prevented as a rule that allows people leisure time would be acceptable. On the other hand it creates difficulties of its own, as the British philosopher, R.M Hare notes a crucial weakness. Sometimes it is right to lie, for example, if a maniac is chasing someone who hides in my shop, and the maniac comes in and asks me where the person is, my gut feeling would be to lie, to save the innocent person but according to rule utilitarianism, I have to be honest and tell the maniac where the person is hiding as I'm not allowed to break a rule, even though in this instance, the result isn't the greatest good. In addition, it's possible that a rule utilitarian could still permit certain practices such as slavery, that appear to be morally unacceptable.

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There is no guarantee that minority interests will be protected. As long as the slaves are the smaller proportion of the people, the greatest good might be to keep them enslaved, because of the benefits that this would give to the majority.

Act utilitarianism, therefore, moves from specific cases to general principles whilst rule utilitarianism moves in the opposite direction and it was Jeremy Bentham who first fully articulated the theory of utilitarianism. He was born in London and lived at a time of great scientific and social change. With revolutions in France and America, demands were being made for human rights and greater democracy. Bentham worked on legal reform and wrote *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), in which he put forward his ethical theory. His theory can be seen in three parts. The motivation of human beings, the principle of utility and the hedonic calculus (which has already been mentioned). Bentham maintained that human beings were motivated by pleasure and pain, somebody with this view can be called a hedonist ('hedone' is Greek for pleasure). He said,

"Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" -Chapter I, I

Bentham believed that all human beings pursued pleasure and sought to avoid pain. He this moral fact, as pleasure and pain identified what we should and shouldn't do. Bentham believed pleasure was the sole good and pain was sole evil, making him a hedonist.

Once Bentham had established that pleasure and pain were the important qualities for determining what was moral, he developed the utility principle. This basically states

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that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by its 'utility' or usefulness. Usefulness refers to the amount pleasure of happiness caused by the action.

"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."

This can be shortened to "An action is right if it produces the greatest good for the greatest number." The end that Bentham's theory identifies are those with the most pleasure and least pain. His theory is democratic, because the pleasure can't be for one person alone. When faced with a moral dilemma, Bentham argues that one should choose to act in such a way that brings about the maximum possible happiness for the most people, this is very much an act utilitarian view. However, the possible consequences of different actions must be measured clearly to establish which option generates the most pleasure and the least pain. To measure the results, Bentham invented the hedonic calculus, which is listed above.

John Stuart Mill (1806-73) lived after Bentham and understood his theory and the problems it caused only too well. He was a child prodigy who was able to read several languages at an early age, and the son of a follower of Jeremy Bentham. Perhaps the greatest British philosopher of the nineteenth century, he was an administrator for the East India Company and a Member of Parliament. Amongst his other works, he wrote 'On the Subjugation of Women', one of the inspirations behind modern feminism. His works concerning ethics were 'On Liberty' (1859) and 'Utilitarianism' (1861).

Mill wanted to define pleasure a little more carefully, and this involved shifting the emphasis from quantity to quality. Mill maintained that the well-being of the

individual was of greatest importance and that happiness is most effectively gained when individuals are free to pursue their own ends, subject to rules that protect the common good of all. While Mill accepted the utility principle of the greatest good for the greatest number, he was concerned about scandals such as slavery could be justified. If the greatest good for the greatest number was purely quantitative, based on the quantities of pleasure and pain caused, what would stop one person's pleasure from being completely extinguished if the majority gained pleasure from that act? To address this difficulty, Mill focussed on qualitative pleasures. Mill distinguished between the higher pleasures, associated with the mind, and lower pleasures, associated with the body. Clearly the two are linked. It is difficult to experience the pleasures of intellectual pursuits, such as reading poetry, whilst remaining perpetually cold and hungry. But after the minimum requirements of the body have been satisfied, that is, after the lower pleasures associated with the body have been attended to, then the real moral business involves pursuit of higher goods mental, cultural and spiritual. The higher pleasures of the mind are to be preferred to the lower pleasures of the body, as Mill states:

“It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied” –*Mill, 1893, Chapter 2.*

Jeremy Bentham's theory has a number of clear benefits. It seems reasonable to link morality with the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of pain and miser, and this connection would receive popular support in society today as it seems natural to consider the consequences of our actions when deciding what to do. Utilitarianism offers a balanced, democratic morality that pursuits that are at the expense of the majority. It is a

commonsense system that's practically applicable to real-life situations, it has no need for a special wisdom.

However, there are a number of difficulties with utilitarianism. This first difficulty concerns all teleological theories, ones that real on the consequences for deciding which actions are good. I need to be sure that what I think will come about as a result of a particular action will actually come about. Utilitarianism depends upon accurate predictions of the futures, which is impossible to wholly achieve in every decision we make today. A second difficulty is found in measuring pleasure. The balancing process brought about using the seven criteria of the hedonic calculus appears straightforward, but can different pleasures and different pains be so easily qualified? Is it possible to compare the pleasure of watching a child grow into adults with the pleasure of watching T.V? It is very difficult, almost impossible, to quantify these pleasures, making it inappropriate and unappealing to follow in the nineteenth century. The hedonic calculus isn't as straightforward as it appears as it questionable whether an action can be declared good by an empirical test in the way the hedonic calculus suggests. A more profound difficulty concerns the issue of justice. While utilitarianism ensures a maximum pleasure result, it does not set out how that pleasure is distributed. It only ensures that the most people receive the pleasure but it guarantees nothing for minorities. There's nothing in utilitarianism that prevents the total sacrifice of one pleasure for the benefit of the whole. Five bullies get pleasure from torturing one single boy. His pleasure is sacrificed for greater benefit of theirs, which is, of course, absurd.

In his book, 'A Short History of Ethics (1966) Alasdair MacIntyre notes that utilitarianism justify horrendous acts as being for the pleasure of the many. The Nazi

policy of persecution and, eventually, extermination of Jews could be considered good if the greater population thought it pleasurable. This is clearly ridiculous and the idea alone is enough to discourage the society today from following a theory that allows such injustice. He also identifies the focus on happiness as the cause of the problem.

Utilitarianism fails to consider different views on what happiness is. It asserts that there's a common agreement about what brings pleasure and what brings pain. This can be challenged on many levels. Not only do people have different tastes with regards to art, music and literature, but there are even extreme exceptions with regard to physical sensations, for example, there are people who find pleasure in experiencing pain. Therefore, if human beings don't have the same idea of what gives them pleasure and pain, then the premise on which utilitarianism is built severely weakened.

A contemporary adherent is Peter Singer, an extreme utilitarian who has done a huge amount of work for animal rights. He argues in 'Practical Ethics' (1993) for a modified view of utilitarianism. He suggests that our ethical decisions should benefit the best interests of those affected, rather than simple pleasure, and that no individual's interests can be considered more valuable than another's. Many people disagree with Peter Singer because of his severe view and unfortunately this has been the basis on which preconceptions of what utilitarianism is today.

Although it provides a persuasive ethical theory, the people of the twenty first century will soon discover that once put into practice, the theory has major faults which, in the society today, are too great to be ignored, therefore not only making utilitarianism an unfair system of ethics but, if taken too literally, a destructive one.