

Utilitarianism



Key words:

A Posteriori: knowledge gained through empirical evidence

Empirical: we use our 5 senses to gain this experience.

Teleological: Telos = “purpose” or “end”.

Instrumental: to serve as a means of pursuing an aim.

Principle of utility: The Utilitarian maxim that seeks “the greatest good for the greatest number”. The method for maximising good.

Maxim: moral principle which demands practical application.

Hedonism: belief that pleasure is the chief good. Essentially, humans are motivated by pleasure and pain.

Hedonic calculus: The system of calculating whether an action will maximise pleasure and minimise pain.

Principle of universability: The principle is based on the idea that moral equality demands equal treatment. It can be captured in the directive “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It presumes that all moral actors are equal and that we cannot favour ourselves by appealing to the particular facts of a situation

Key philosopher one: Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

Human motivation- Bentham maintained humans are hedonists/ hedonistic.

Hedonism: belief that pleasure is the chief good. Essentially, humans are motivated by pleasure and pain.

“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 determine what we shall do”. Bentham -The Principles of Morals and Legislation.

Principle of Utility for Bentham. Utility= usefulness. Usefulness = amount of pleasure/ pain 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 appears to have augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question.” Bentham

Bentham’s Utilitarianism can be referred to as Hedonic Utilitarianism.



Key philosopher one: Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) (continued)

To calculate how to maximise pleasure and minimise pain we can use the Hedonic Calculus.

Hedonic Calculus: The system of calculating whether an action will maximise pleasure and minimise pain.

The Hedonic Calculus helps us make PRACTICAL decisions. May also be referred to as the felicific calculus (felicific: relating to or promoting increased happiness)

The Hedonic calculus has 7 steps/ calculations.

1. Intensity – how strong is the pleasure/pain?
2. Duration- how long will the pleasure/ pain last?
3. Certainty – how sure are we the pleasure/ pain will occur?
4. Remoteness- how soon will the pleasure/ pain occur?
5. Fecundity – how likely is it the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind?
6. Purity- how likely is it this action will only cause pleasure or pain?
7. Extent- how many people will be effected?



Evaluating Jeremy Bentham - Strengths

- ✓ Universal: every culture has its own rules, which shows deontology is wrong about universal rules. However, the principle of utility, reducing harm and increasing happiness does apply in every culture. Examples of different rules in different culture: In the western world we generally bury or cremate the dead. In the past some Native American cultures such as the Mayoruna people practiced endocannibalism- the practice of eating the dead. This was seen as a sign of respect.
- ✓ Happiness: it seems right that happiness is given value. Who would argue creating happiness is a bad thing?
- ✓ Easy to use: weighing up the positive and negative consequences of our actions is something we learn to do from childhood. And Bentham adds the Hedonic Calculus to make our decision even easier.
- ✓ Secular: This theory does not rely on specific beliefs about God. In a multi-cultural world, with a growing number of atheists, surely a secular ethical theory is more sensible and most useful.
- ✓ Democratic: it seems the fairest way to run a country (which requires a great deal of ethical decision making) is to balance up everyone’s interests. The Principle of Utility is utilised by many modern democratic governments.



Evaluating Jeremy Bentham – Weaknesses

- Hedonism can be criticised: Is human pleasure really the chief good? And will pleasure really lead to human contentment. First of all it seems there are other things with intrinsic worth- love, freedom, integrity, self-worth etc. Furthermore Robert Nozick uses the following thought experiment to shows pleasure will not always lead to contentment. Imagine you could be plugged into a machine that gave an experience you desired. He argues most humans would not want to be plugged in- especially for the long run. The values above- freedom etc. are more important to most. (Similar to the concept found in the Matrix)
- Mechanical: by reducing ethical dilemmas and decision to a series of mathematical or logical calculation in the Hedonic Calculus you lose a sense of what is truly valuable.
- Unpredictable: a problem with teleological theories in general. You never be certain of what will happen in the future.
- Naturalistic Fallacy: the idea that just because nature acts in a certain way it doesn’t follow that this is the way things ought to be. Just because people desire pleasure, doesn’t mean pleasure is desirable.
- Immeasurable and incalculable: You can assign a value to pleasure. Even if you could even the smallest decision we make could have a huge impact. You can’t possibly calculate the impact all you actions are going to take.
- The Logical Consequence of Bentham’s theory can lead to common sense evil: There a number of examples when using Bentham’s Principle of Utility actually lead to a consequence which our common sense tells us is wrong. For example: slavery (p.67 for explanation). The Nazi’s Final Solution- which slaughtered over 6 million people: the overall population of Germany was much higher than this (estimated 69 million).
- You need a lot of time and knowledge: If you are striving for long term happiness you need to have a good understanding of the consequences your decision could make. Credit crunch 2008 (p.68). Furthermore to calculate the impact of all your actions would be extremely time consuming. Bentham was rich enough not to work, perhaps he had the time to calculate the impact of his decisions. But compare him to a Victorian Factory worker of the same era- he wouldn’t have time.

Utilitarianism

Key philosopher two: John Stuart Mill

The well-being of the individual is of greatest importance and is most effectively gained when individuals are free to pursue their own ends, subject to rules to protect the common good.

Mill accepted the Principle of Utility: the greatest good for the greatest number. However, for Mill this "good" was happiness, not pleasure. He was also concerned with the difficulties raised by this maxim. Allowing the majority to destroy the minority.

Problems arise because Bentham's view of pleasure is QUANTATIVE (How much?) rather than QUALITATIVE (How good?). Mill believed some pleasures are better than others.

"Some kinds of pleasures are more desirable and more valuable than others, it would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is not also considered as well as quantity."

Mill developed a system of higher and lower pleasures to distinguish quality of pleasure. Higher pleasures, from the mind. Superior/ to be preferred. E.g. Art, poetry etc. Lower pleasures, connected to the body. Inferior. E.g. Food, drink, sex.

When offered a choice between higher and lower pleasure we ought to go for the higher pleasure. Supported by Plato. Plato said that philosophical thinking was the highest activity for humans.

"It is better to be a human dissatisfied, than a pig satisfied. Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." Mill.

He rejects the Hedonic Calculus as this largely quantitative and has no measure of quality of pleasure. As you can imagine he also rejected Hedonism. Insofar as any pleasure being the chief good.

Mill argued to follow the Principle of Utility we need a principle of universality. **"Each person's happiness is good to that person and the general happiness, therefore is a good to the aggregate of all persons".**

This principle of universality should protect people because it means the following:

- What is right for one in a situation is right or wrong for all.
- Each person desires his own happiness. So each person should aim for his happiness.
- Therefore, everyone ought to aim for the happiness of everyone.
- Supported by the Golden Rule of Christianity: "Do to others as you would have them do to you". (Matthew 7:12)



Key philosopher two: John Stuart Mill (continued)

Mill insisted there were certain rules which ought to be followed in order to avoid the pitfalls of Bentham's theory.

These are general rules which will bring about the best consequences for the community.

The best overall rule is determined by recognising the course of action, when pursued by the whole community will lead to the best result. E.g. driving on the correct side of the road.

Act Utilitarianism Bentham	Rule Utilitarianism Mill
The Principle of Utility must be directly applied for each individual situation.	Does have some general rules in place to avoid pitfalls of Act UT.
When determining whether the act is right, it is the value of consequences of the particular act that count.	These are general rules which will bring about the best consequences for the community.
So in one situation it may be best to lie, in another not	Can these rules be broken?
Very flexible	<p>Mill gave 2 situations when rules can be broken:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't give information to someone who will use it for evil. • Do withhold information from someone who is dangerously ill, for fear of causing harm
But can lead to some very extreme results and justifies A LOT of actions.	

Preference Utilitarianism Main Philosopher: Peter Singer

Singer's preference Utilitarianism is rooted in the idea that every human wants a good life.

This is arguably what Bentham based his Utilitarianism on. We all want to maximise our happiness.

Singer agrees that we should be maximising goodness. Principle of Utility=greatest good for the greatest number. However, unlike Bentham and Mill, who focus on pleasures (in their own way), Singer wants to maximise good by examining PREFERENCES. This links to maximising welfare, rather than pleasure etc. We have different types of preferences.



Preference Utilitarianism Main Philosopher: Peter Singer (continued)

Manifest preferences: what you want NOW.

EG. You see a cupcake, so you immediately desire a cupcake. Eating a cupcake is what you would prefer at this time.

True preference: based on a reflection of all the information and likely consequences.

EG. You reflect on the consequences of eating the cake. You realise that if you eat the cake you may gain weight and this is a long term consequence you would rather avoid. You would PREFER not to get fat. True preferences, states Singer, are those that a person would accept if "they were fully informed, reflective, and vividly aware of the consequences of satisfying their preferences". True preferences are what we ought to be maximising.

We do each have our individual preferences. However, to achieve general welfare we have to 'trade-off' preferences. So in some situations preferences may be rejected. To achieve good we must allow as many people as possible to satisfy their preferences. Remember- "The greatest good for the greatest number." 'Good' means satisfying preferences.

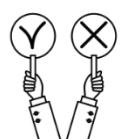
We must consider the preference of all of those involved. We need to consider these preferences as an 'impartial spectator' if we are to make a fair ethical judgement. You can't bring love and relationships into decisions. We call this the Principle of equal consideration of interests. Singer said "My interests cannot, simply because they are my own, count more than the interests of anyone else."

Strengths

- ✓ Pragmatic- it is evident we all have preferences and this is a practical thing to consider in everyday life. (Of course we want to maximise our preferences- IT IS WHAT WE PREFER).
- ✓ It can be seen as taking in the global impact of decisions made.
- ✓ You avoid all the problems you might associate with happiness (ranking etc.)
- ✓ Could be seen as taking into account cultural diversity, as they can take into account THEIR preference

Drawbacks:

- What if you can't state your preference? Is it not considered? This issue is not dealt with by Singer. (Consider the case of infants or those with dementia)
- It can be hard to not consider family/ loved ones more highly than others. WD Ross would call these biases "Prima Facie Duties". Duties to care for our family/ friends and people we love, before others. (Very easy to come up with an example).
- Our preferences change, they are not static. They change on the basis of what is available. Fish and chips.





Moral law: binding moral obligations

Maxims: another word for moral rules, determined by reason

Duty: duties are created by the moral law, to follow it is our duty. The word deontological means duty –based

Summum bonum: the highest, most supreme good

Good will: a person of good will is a person who makes decisions according to the moral law

Categorical imperative: an unconditional moral obligation that is always binding irrespective of a person's inclination or purpose

Hypothetical imperative: a moral obligation that applies only if one desires the implied goal

Kingdom of ends: an imagined future in which all people act in accordance to the moral law, the categorical imperative

A Posteriori: knowledge gained through empirical evidence

Empirical evidence: gained through our five senses

A priori: knowledge gained without experience

Analytic statement: In an analytic statement the words in the statement will verify if the statement is true or false. A predicate is part of a sentence. In an analytic statement the predicate will say something necessarily true (or false) of the subject of the sentence.

Synthetic sentence: A synthetic statement requires further external information to verify if it is true or false. The evidence will normally be empirical- using our five senses.

Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Deontological ethical theories: concerned solely with an action rather than the consequence. We decide if something is right or wrong based on the action taken. Moral value is conferred by the virtue of the actions in themselves. If a certain act is wrong, then it is always wrong. Making deontological theories objective and absolute.

Kant's ethical theory is deontological. The right or wrongness of an action is based on the action, not the consequence. *For example, if a murderer knocked on the door as asked if your friend was in (and they are) you must tell the truth, even if it means the murderer will kill your friend. The act of telling a lie is wrong.*



Kant continued...

The Moral Law



Kant was a rationalist: reason is the means by which we ought to analyse the world.

There is an objective moral law, this means that moral laws exist, independent of individual viewpoints. These laws are binding/ they stand no matter what.

Moral statements are "A priori synthetic".

A priori: moral knowledge is gained by pure reason, not by sense experience.

Synthetic: moral statements can be right or wrong.

Ethical statements are a priori synthetic because they are knowable through pure reason, but may or may not be true. You use your reason to work out if it is right or wrong.

Duty and Good Will

- Highest form of good= Good Will. To have good will is to do one's duty. To act out of duty is to perform actions that are morally obligatory and not to perform those that are forbidden. Do the good, avoid the bad. We perform our duty because it is our duty.
- We do not perform a duty for a good consequence, we do it for the duty itself. Duty is good in itself. We should not act based on our emotions or out of self-interest. *For example, you help an old lady over the road out of kindness. This is not a moral action. It was motivated by kindness not duty.*
- Kant did acknowledge that happiness is good. Yet, the highest good is Good Will- which is performing your duty. Happiness can be seen as a reward for doing our duty, but not as the motivation. (Or the theory would teleological).
- Doing your duty is in itself a good thing, regardless of the consequences. Fulfilling our duty is not a stepping stone to a morally good consequence, but is good in itself.



Key quotes

"Good will shine forth like a precious jewel"

"It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as a good thing without qualification, except good will."

All moral people must be rational beings.

All people capable of reason have the duty to perform morally.

For Kant if I am to act morally then I must be capable of exercising freedom or autonomy of the will. You cannot be moral unless you have freedom. We know we are free because we experience moral choice.

SUMMUM BONUM (You can also look at Moral Argument)

- Kant referred to the highest good as the Summum Bonum.
- The best possible good comprising of virtue and happiness
- In Kant's famous argument OUGHT implies CAN: an obligation to do something implies the possibility that the goal can be achieved, otherwise there can be no obligation. It has to be possible
- However, while humans can achieve virtue, it is clearly outside their power to ensure that virtue is rewarded or coincides with happiness.
- Thus there is a need to postulate the existence of God as the one who has the power to bring virtue and happiness into harmony. Such proportioning clearly does not take place before death, so Kant also argued that there must be survival after death.

Categorical and hypothetical imperatives

Imperatives = something which must be done

"All imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically... if the action would be good simply as a means to something else, then the imperative is hypothetical; but if the action is represented as good in itself... then the imperative is categorical."

Hypothetical imperative= a command that is conditional on personal desire or motive. It informs us of a factual relation between a goal and how to achieve it. There is no concept of obligation attached to it and Kant didn't see any moral reference in there.

Hypothetical imperatives will always begin with an 'if'. *If you want X you must do Y. If you want to lose weight then you must diet.*

A Categorical imperative tells us what we ought to do. A categorical imperative helps us know which actions are obligatory and which are forbidden. The actions which are obligatory will always be obligatory. Those which are forbidden will always be forbidden.

Kant argued that morality is prescriptive and moral statements are categorical in that they prescribe actions irrespective of the result. They are moral obligations. Once you are aware of a moral requirement your awareness is reason enough to take action.



Categorical imperative

Maxims: moral principles, subjective in nature, which demand practical application. *For example: do not lie.*

But how do we know if a moral maxim should be accepted as a universal moral law?

The categorical imperative has three principles or three tests which help us show if a moral maxim should be a universal law (a moral law followed in ALL situations).

1. **Universal Law.**

2. **Treat humans as ends not as 'means to an end'**

3. **The Kingdom of Ends**

Universal law

The only actions that are moral are those that can be universalised – applied in all situations and to all rational beings, without exception. If something is wrong for one person it is wrong for everyone. *For example: you state it is wrong to steal, yet you can't afford your rent so it's okay for you. This is not acceptable. You can't have one rule for you and another for someone else.* One rule for everyone.



"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should be universal law."

So why NO exceptions?

- All exceptions will cause harm to someone or have a damaging effect on society, according to Kant. *For example: a lie always harms someone. If not the liar, then society. If everyone was to think it was acceptable to lie society would become intolerable and untrustworthy.*

"For an action to be morally valid, the agent- or person performing the act- must not carry out the action unless he or she believes that, in the same situation, all people should act the same way".



Treat humans as ends not as 'means to an end'

- Kant held human beings as the pinnacle of creation. Therefore, it can never be moral to exploit people, to use them as a means to an end.
- Each person is unique and of equal value so cannot be sacrificed, even if it would result in some overall greater good.
- *For example: some people may argue that killing one person to save many lives is acceptable. But this is treating this individual simply as a means to an end- a way of achieving a goal. It completely disregards the rights of this person as a unique individual. Therefore, Kant would say it is FORBIDDEN.*
- You could give the example of the prisoners and prison guard.

"So act that you treat humanity, both in your own person and in the person of every other human being, never merely as a means, but always at the same time as an end".



The Kingdom of Ends

- Kant argued that our actions had to be based on the assumption that others would also act morally and treat everyone as ends, not means.
- If you were making the law and it could not be applied in world in which we all treated one another as ends, then you cannot make it an objective moral law.
- *Imagine you are put on an island with 5 other people. You sit down to establish some Island rules. As you discuss ideas you will realise you have similar suggestions. People want to live morally, rather than immorally.*
- Kant knew to realise a reality of everyone pursuing the moral and avoiding the immoral was almost impossible. However, he maintained that it must be attempted.

"So act as if you were through your maxim a law-making member of a Kingdom of Ends."

In the exam, after explaining the three tests of the Categorical Imperative you can apply all three to the example above to show why Kant would deem this to be wrong – expanding on the following points.

- 1) You would not **ALWAYS** bomb civilians, not everyone would do this in all situations.
- 2) You are treating humans as means to an end.
- 3) In a moral society, where we don't treat people as means to an end, most people would decide this is wrong.

Example: During the Second World War, the Allies pursued a policy of bombing civilian targets, in the hope that the Axis powers would be weakened by loss of morale.

Evaluating Kant – Strengths

- ✓ Deontology gives a powerful set of moral principles: it is absolute, clear and simple.
- ✓ The moral value of an action comes from the intrinsic rightness of an action- it prevents actions which are inherently wrong.
- ✓ Deontology rejects a teleological approach- the possible and future consequences of an action which are beyond our control. It makes decisions quick!
- ✓ Justice is always an absolute, even if the majority does not benefit. It is therefore impartial and unaffected by social factors or pressures.
- ✓ It recognises moral absolutes which do not change with time or culture.
- ✓ Kant emphasises the need for reason in his ethics. He regards human beings as rational beings who should use their reason to determine moral law. It is therefore impartial because it has a rational basis. It is not effected by emotion. It is fairer.
- ✓ The formula/ principle of the end in itself enshrines the humanitarian principle by which all people are regarded as of equal value and worthy of protection.
- ✓ Kant's theory gives humans intrinsic worth as rational beings, the high point of creation, superior to animals.

Evaluating Kant – Weaknesses

- ✓ Deontological theories have been criticised because they make moral obligation appear arbitrary or inexplicable except by reference to duty. There are in fact many other factors which influence our decision making.
- ✓ It can be impractical: There are sometimes circumstances when it may be necessary to sacrifice the good of a few for the good of the many
- ✓ JS MILL states the theory is incomplete as it does not tell us what to do when our duties conflict. The murderer at the door- it is more important to tell the truth or save a life? Kant gives no advice.
- ✓ W D ROSS states we have Prima Facie Duties. These are duties towards people such as family and friends. They take priority over our duties to strangers. We cannot help this bias we feel. This suggests we cannot be impartial and ignore emotions like Kant wanted us too.
- ✓ Kant said for an imperative to be categorical (and therefore a moral statement) it needs to be able to be universalised. However, if the principle of universality is taken to its logical extreme it becomes a *reductio ad absurdum* – the argument becomes ridiculous. Anything could be universalised, but it does NOT make it a moral statement.
- ✓ The principle of universality is weak because there may be a problem caused by different but similar moral dilemmas. Are any two moral dilemmas the same?
- ✓ The naturalistic fallacy: the is-ought gap. Kant argued that we ought to do what is good to do, that what is inherently good and intrinsically right is the way in which we ought to behave for the mutual good of all regardless of the consequences. Eg. If we say it is good to be kind to children, then we ought to be kind to children. Critics of Kant call this the naturalistic fallacy of turning is into ought. If we say something is the case, then that is a descriptive statement. If we say something ought to be the case then that is a prescriptive statement. David Hume (1711-1776), observed that there is nothing in a descriptive statement which allows us to proceed from what people actually do, to making a rule which states what people ought to do.
- ✓ Kant emphasises reason in his theory. However, you cannot guarantee that the use of reason will lead everyone to the same conclusion. There are other factors which govern our reason. Eg. Background, society. What about people whose reasoning facilities are impaired. Are they therefore intrinsically immoral?