

Utilitarianism



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 possible 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 you 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.

<u>Act Utilitarianism Bentham</u>	<u>Rule Utilitarianism Mill</u>
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	Mill gave 2 situations when rules can be broken: <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.

