

Utilitarianism is
doctrine worthy only
of swine philosophy
essay



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Utilitarianism is a framework used to measure the rightness of someones actions does this framework have practical uses or is it worthy only of swine? This essay shall outline Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism and give its criticisms. Next I outline how John Mill responds to the falls of Bentham with his revised version of Utilitarianism and the how the critics react to Mill.<<<>>>

How should we know when we do an action it is the right or wrong one out of all the possible actions? What makes an action right or wrong? Jeremy Bentham argues utility is a measurable quantity positioned on the axis of pain and pleasure and humanity is governed by these sovereign masters. Humans desire pleasure and avoid pain at all costs. It follows the moral thing to do would be to maximise utility for all. To do just that Utilitarianism's principle of utility steps in and states that an action is right if it produces the greatest happiness of the greatest number and we should pursue this in all contexts. From the private individual actions to governmental institutions: the principle should be applied.

When giving two or more options Bentham's Utilitarian would act as follows. Assess the pleasure each individual effected would be increased or decreased as a result. Sum all the individuals pleasure. Make a comparison between each option and the morally right option is that which leads to the greatest summed pleasure. Therefore ones actions should consider everyone equally and not give bias to themselves.

Firstly, we need to be able to measure pleasure to compare and make judgments. Bentham uses his method of felicific calculus. He described

pleasure as a multidimensional quantity made up of seven elements: intensity (how strong the pleasure is); duration (how long the pleasure lasts); certainty (how likely the pleasure will occur); propinquity (how delayed the pleasure is); fecundity (probability of similar pleasure being followed); purity (probability that it will be followed by sensations of the opposite kind); and extent (how many people would be effected). The calculation takes into considerations like: not to give bias to powerful individuals or ones self as each person is counted as one; scale when the extent (number of people) is large e. g. if the pain affects many people like in a war; and delayed pleasure e. g. a person investing in their education for benefits later in life.

In contrast to Utilitarianism, previously Kantian ethics argued that ethics are absolute rules are not broken no matter what the circumstance. Such theories have fundamental problems for instance if a absolute rule is to never lie; should I not lie to save my friend from being found by kidnappers? Bentham address this problem as utilitarianism is a relative ethical theory. By applying felicific calculus you take into consideration the context solve these problems.

Kantian ethics and Natural law also argued that an action is moral due to not only to its effect but also due to intrinsic worth. When someone gives to the poor, the act is argued to have a moral worth more than the good produced by consequence of the action. However Utilitarianism argues the only aspect of an action which has moral significance is its consequences and not from any intrinsic worth. Utilitarianism is therefore a consequential theory.

However Thomas Carlyle raised the criticism that humans are not robots which function only because of desires and wants. We do not scavenge for food all day like animals, only concerned with ourselves. Humans are intelligent beings and use abstract reasoning when in situations. We do not merely act like swine! Carlyle raised the point using felicific calculus you could argue that stealing from a large company would be the moral thing. The increase of pleasure of a single individual is far greater than that of the unnoticeable decrease of pleasure in a large company. Also what would be wrong in getting drunk throughout the day? My drunken happiness would be far greater than the harm it causes others. Carlyle was afraid that such actions and others would be justifiable by Utilitarianism if employed in all contexts. Pushpin is as good as poetry Bentham replied and would argue that it is better to be satisfied doing such actions than someone being more honourable dissatisfied.

However Carlyle and others criticise further stating its uncompassionate and inhuman. Two highly contested cases support this position. Firstly the prison guard scenario: if three prison guards beat up a prisoner for their own enjoyment. Secondly the fit-up scenario: a major leader is killed; consequentially riots are starting to break out in the streets and the police have no leads. So they arrest and prosecute a random individual to calm the situation. In both situations it could be argued that the overall pleasure is maximised.

Although it could be said that Bentham would argue the case for the first two scenarios, the second two are obviously morally wrong or at least controversial. It could be argued that in the prison guard scenario the <https://assignbuster.com/utilitarianism-is-doctrine-worthy-only-of-swine-philosophy-essay/>

magnitude of the stress and pain of the prisoner is greater than that of the sum of the pleasure of the guards. However according to Bentham's felicific calculus the number of people is a factor (the extent dimension). Therefore by increasing the guard from three to ten or even one million you would scale the overall pleasure of the guards. This is therefore a large problem at least to most. In the fit-up scenario it could be argued that pain and unease would be caused if the public would know that people were being randomly chosen and picked on. This would cause overall grief and outweigh the pleasure gained. However, what if only a very small minority knew such things happened? No grief would be caused, and it would be calculated as the right thing to do.

Bentham, trying to plug the holes in absolute ethical theories has opened up others in relative theories. John Mill recognised Carlyle's strong criticism of Bentham's Utilitarianism and tried to modify Utilitarianism accordingly. Mill argued that happiness, not pleasure, should be the standard of utility. Mill argues happiness is something which is more specific to humans and is more measurable. In an attempt to solve the prison guard scenario he states that there are many modes and levels of happiness which differ only in qualitative ways. Only those who have experienced pleasure of both sorts are competent judges of their relative quality. For instance a young girl could not judge between the happiness caused by having a child or that of eating her favourite toffee; only a mother could do so. Therefore pushpin is [not] as good as poetry. Mill argues that many would value intellectual pleasures as higher than that of physical pleasures: as it is better being a human satisfied than a pig dissatisfied. This is a direct attack on Carlyle's criticism. In the

prison guard scenario, the physical lower order happiness of beating the prisoner is rated less than the higher order mental unhappiness of the prisoner and therefore would not be a morally good thing to do.

Arguably this could solve the scaling problem as even a million prison guards physical happiness is not greater than the

Mill pushes asides Bentham hedonistic equations as not all pleasure and pains are preferred or resented equally.

However Mill gives bias argues that the high order pleasures are those of the intellectual order.

Utilitarianism is Bentham attempt at bringing scientific certainty to ethics. He applies mathematical rigour to something previously analysed qualitatively and not quantifiably. This therefore removes arguments and opinion, as only logic and reason can be used.

However the deductions formed are only true if the premise is true: that humanity our governed by pain and pleasure. Even if the logic is agreeable, argument can always be found in how to perform the calculations and methodology of deciding the right action.

It could even be said that the calculations are impossible as the uncertainty in the measurement is much larger than that of the quantity. For example if I try to measure width of a moving billiard ball

Many argue that not only is the calculation impossible to conduct it is also impractical. Rule Utilitarianism, discussed later, tries to address these criticisms. Also how do you compare the different dimensions of the pleasure.

Bentham

Mill address criticism of Carlyle. Mill. Proof of utility

Max stating the obvious

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