

# Utilitarianism is the theory philosophy essay



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Utilitarianism is what philosophers call a consequentialist theory. A consequentialist theory is an ethical theory that states that the consequences, or effect, of an action determine if an action is morally right or wrong. With utilitarianism, an action is determined to be morally right or wrong if it brings about more pleasure or pain. The effect of the action is what a utilitarian looks at to determine if that action is the proper one.

Utilitarianism was first detailed by Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher. (Vaughn 83) He believed that happiness is the only true good that exists. Therefore, the only morally right actions were the ones that created the most happiness or prevented the most sadness. (Bentham) Bentham's form of utilitarianism, which is commonly known as classic utilitarianism today, was very simple and easy to use. Bentham believed that the morally right action was the one that had the most net happiness for everyone that would be affected. In order to determine which action was the morally correct one, a person would add up all the units of happiness and then subtract all the units of sadness that the action would create. The person making the decision would repeat these steps for all possible actions that can be taken. Once finished, the action with the total net happiness would be the one that the person would choose. Also, every time an instance occurs where an action needs to be decided, each action is always calculated no matter how similar it may be to another instance. This principle that Bentham followed is called the principle of utility. John Mill, a student of Jeremy Bentham, took this principle and expanded upon it. (Vaughn 83)

John Mill called the principle of utility by a different name, the greatest happiness principle. In Mill's words, " actions are right in proportion as they

tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the opposite of happiness." (Vaughn 84) Mill believed that happiness varied in quantity and quality, whereas, Bentham believed that happiness only varied in quantity. Mill classified the different qualities of happiness into two levels, the higher level and the lower level. The lower levels of happiness are like the ones based off of taste and touch. Eating extravagant food and participating in sexual activities are some examples of actions that produce lower level happiness. (Vaughn 84) These lower levels produce a more immediate effect but the happiness is not as fulfilling as the higher levels. Examples of actions that produce higher levels of happiness include the pursuit of knowledge and seeing the world. These actions may have a lower chance of producing happiness than the lower level actions, but the higher level of happiness gained is a lot more fulfilling. (Vaughn 84)

There are two forms of modern utilitarianism, act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism. Classic utilitarianism, the form of utilitarianism created by Bentham, is the form of utilitarianism that started act-utilitarianism. Part of the principle of utility that Bentham believed in says that each instance an action needs to be decided upon is its own instance and needs to be calculated. Utilitarians that follow this belief follow the act-utilitarianism form of utilitarianism. An act-utilitarian believes that each time an action needs decided upon, that particular event is a completely different than any other and all possible actions need to be calculated. The other form of utilitarianism is rule-utilitarianism. Rule-utilitarians believe that the morally correct action is the one that follows a general rule. The reason that rule-utilitarians follow rules is because if those rules are followed, then the

greatest happiness occurs throughout time for everyone. It is common for some rules to have exceptions however. This occurs because there could be an instance where following the rule will not produce the greatest happiness over time.

Two examples of a moral situation will be given to show the difference between the reasoning behind act-utilitarianism and the reasoning behind rule-utilitarianism. The first example will show how the reasoning for each different form can affect the choice of action. The second example will show the reasoning for each different form can make someone choose the same answer.

Billy and Jenny have a test coming up in their philosophy class. Jenny is very nervous about the test because she does not feel like she knows the material well enough. Billy tries to convince Jenny that she should cheat on the test to get a good grade. Jenny is faced with a problem that has only two solutions. Either she can cheat on the test or not cheat on the test and do poorly. The problem will first be looked at by an act-utilitarian's point of view. If Jenny cheats on the test and does not get caught, then she will get a good grade. The good grade will make her happy and her parents happy. If she doesn't cheat on the test then she will do poorly and make her parents and herself unhappy. So the morally right action is, " Jenny should cheat to get a good grade."

Now the problem will be looked at with a rule-utilitarian's point of view. The general rule that will be followed is, " do not cheat." If Jenny cheats and doesn't get caught, she will get a good grade which will make her and her

parents happy. However, if Jenny cheats, she is promoting cheating. Then other people will start cheating and there will be people out in the work force that do not have the proper knowledge and will cause many problems in the future. Therefore, the action for Jenny to cheat causes more harm than good. The opposite is true if Jenny follows the general rule that cheating is bad. She will do poorly on the test which will make her and her parents upset. Meanwhile, other people will not be tempted to cheat which will make the world a better place in the future. So for rule-utilitarianism, Jenny should not cheat.

For the second example, Johnny just turned 21 and is at a friend's house to celebrate. It is three o'clock in the morning and Johnny is very intoxicated. All of his friends are passed out. Johnny has to go home because he has to be up early in the morning at home to help his father with chores. Johnny has two choices, he can either try to drive home drunk or he can call his parents to come pick him up. If Johnny tries to drive home drunk, he may get into an accident with someone and cause serious harm or even death. This will make many people very unhappy and provide no happiness. If Johnny calls his parents, then they will be upset with him which will make him unhappy. From an act-utilitarian's point of view, Johnny should call his parents because it causes the least amount of unhappiness.

Using a rule-utilitarian's point of view, the general rule that should be followed is, "do not drive drunk." If Johnny does drive home and makes it there safely, then he is happy and no one is immediately unhappy. However, by driving home drunk, Johnny has made other people think they can drive home drunk as well. This will cause many accidents on the road and an

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increase in the number of cops which will make many people unhappy in the future. This unhappiness overcomes the immediate happiness that will be produced for Johnny. If Johnny calls his parents instead, they will be upset with him but then be proud of him later knowing that he can make a responsible decision. So in the future both Johnny and his parents are happy. Also, people will be less tempted to drive home drunk and make responsible decisions making the roads safer. So the morally correct action for a rule-utilitarian would be to call someone for a ride.

With every theory, the ideas behind the theory are attacked, and utilitarianism is no exception. One of the problems is that utilitarianism fails to meet the first criterion for a coherent moral theory. This criterion is the theory's consistency with considered judgments. One of the statements of the utilitarianism theory is that everyone that an action affects should be affected equally. The problem is that utilitarianism does not enforce this principle. Utilitarianism states that the action to be chosen should be the one that produces the most happiness with everyone taken into account. Even though utilitarianism says that everyone should be affected equally, the action chosen may not do so. A good example of this problem is given by Lewis Vaughn. He states:

A tsunami destroyed a coastal village in Singapore. Aid is brought to 100 of the victims and the aid can produce 1000 units of happiness. There are two solutions that can be chosen. The first solution is that 901 units of happiness can be produced for one person and one unit of happiness produced for the other 99 people. The second solution is that all 100 people can get 10 units of happiness. (Vaughn 89)

Due to personal experiences and common reasoning, the second option would most commonly be chosen. However, according to utilitarianism, either option is morally viable and option one might be chosen because it is easier to implement.

Another problem with utilitarianism is that it fails the third criterion, usefulness in moral problem solving. The problem that utilitarianism has with this criterion is what some philosophers call the “no-rest problem.” (Vaughn 90) The “no-rest problem” is the problem that utilitarianism always requires people to try and maximize happiness with everyone. So instead of lying in bed reading a book, the person should be out volunteering for a food pantry. Some people would consider actions like this supererogatory. According to utilitarianism, it is the duty of people to perform as many of these supererogatory actions as possible. This means that the meaning of supererogatory is degraded and challenges most people’s moral common sense. (Vaughn 91)

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory that was brought in the open by Jeremy Bentham and expanded by John Mill. The theory states that the morally correct action is the one that maximizes happiness and minimizes sadness equally for everyone involved. There are two main forms of utilitarianism, act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism. Even though utilitarianism is one of the most influential moral theories for modern times, there are still problems with it that philosophers will continue to attack. (Vaughn 83)

## **Work Cited**

Vaughn, Lewis. *Doing Ethics: Moral Reasoning and Contemporary Issues*. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton &, 2010. Print