

# Act and rule utilitarianism essay sample



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Throughout this essay I will be comparing the Act and Rule variations of Utilitarianism to uncover the difference between the two. Utilitarianism is teleological or consequentialist approach to ethics, which argues that something is good or bad according to its benefit for the majority of the people. Jeremy Bentham formalized this theory through his principle of Utility, “ the greatest good for the greatest number”. Act Utilitarianism is often linked to Jeremy Bentham’s principle of Utility as it follows the one rule – “ the greatest good for the greatest number”. So an individual action is only right if it promotes happiness. Rule utilitarianism argues that moral rules, also based on the principle of Utility, should be kept by everyone in similar circumstances.

Act Utilitarianism states that one must decide what action will lead to the greatest good in a particular situation and apply the principle of utility directly. You need to look at the consequences of a particular act and what will bring about the greatest happiness. This makes it teleological as it focuses on the consequences and end point (telos). Act Utilitarianism is also very flexible due it being relative to a situation, rules can vary. There are no necessary moral rules except one: that we should always seek the greatest happiness for the greatest number in all situations. This form of Utilitarianism is therefore closely linked to Bentham’s form of Utilitarianism. An example of where Act Utilitarianism would be imposed is if you were a bodyguard protecting the President and you tackled him down to the floor to save him from being shot, it can be argued that you tackling him down brings little good or happiness, however the consequence of saving his life brings a greater happiness.

Rule Utilitarianism is commonly linked with John Stuart Mill. Rule utilitarians believe that rules should be formed using utilitarian principles for the benefit for everyone in society. Your action would be judged either right or wrong by the goodness or badness of the consequence of a rule that everyone would follow in similar situations. Rule utilitarianism allows us to establish a set of rules/laws, which would promote happiness and generally be right in most circumstances for example, being honest or keeping your promises. Though the formation of these rules would be based on the consequence (making it consequentialist), the appliance of Rule utilitarianism would be deontological because it looks at the action that has been already established into a rule. Strong Rule utilitarians believe that these rules should never be disobey no matter what, while more lenient and weak Rule utilitarians believe though there should be widely accepted guidelines, they should not always be followed in a situation where disregarding a rule would bring greater happiness.

However, there are many differences of these two forms of Utilitarianism, one being that Act Utilitarians is applied directly to a particular action in a particular circumstance, while Rule Utilitarianism is applied to a selection of set of rules which are in turn used to determine what to do in particular situations. Another key difference is that Act Utilitarianism is flexible as it holds no more rules, (other than the principle of Utility in all situations), as the action that should be applied to every situation is relative in comparison to Rule utilitarianism which has an established set of rules that cannot transition from age to age. For example, Act Utilitarianism would allow for changes in moral rules over centuries while Rule Utilitarianism would have

already established rules, which, if followed properly, should not be broken. For example, over 2000 years ago slavery might have been accepted and considered socially moral, over the years Act utilitarians would have changed their views on this due to the flexibility of their principle, while a Rule Utilitarian would not break the set of rules established for this particular situation.

To conclude, though both Act and Rule utilitarianism are linked to the principle of Utility, one must not confuse the two as similar at all. This is because Act Utilitarianism refers to Laws as rules of thumb that can be disregarded if the circumstance will result in the greatest good for the greatest number. Rule Utilitarianism argues that moral rules deriving from the principle of utility, should be kept by everyone for a society to prosper and be happy. Act Utilitarianism is also much more flexible as it allows the principle of utility to be applied relatively to a situation, in comparison to Rule Utilitarianism, which if you are a strong follower, has established rules that cannot be adjusted or disobeyed depending on the situation.