

Utilitarianism is a  
good ethical theory



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Utilitarianism declares there are no moral absolutes, therefore " x" action is always right, or " x" action is always wrong. Instead, an action is " right" if it secures the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. This allows the theory to be applied to more complex moral dilemmas, for instance, whether or not to torture a suspected terrorist in order to find the location of a bomb that could kill many more people. Somebody who believes in moral absolutes would possibly say that to torture is always intrinsically, inherently wrong - however this belief would mean that possibly many people would die, when they could have been saved.

Some people would see moral absolutes as being impractical and even harmful to others in this case, and therefore a theory where the end justifies the means is preferable. Utilitarian theory could be applied to any situation, taking into account the difficulties, positives and negatives of the decision you need to make, and some may argue that rigidly following moral absolutes may do more harm than good. However, how does a person measure the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people?

There is no " currency" in happiness, there are different types of happiness; there is contentment, intense happiness and mild happiness. To the individual, happiness will be of a different measure entirely. And how certain can you be that your perception of how happy it will make other people is not simply a personal opinion. It was indeed Hitler's personal opinion that the only solution to the " problem" of the Jews was to brutally murder them, to benefit the Aryan " master" race. This is of course an extreme example; however it is true that often people's opinions may vary as to what is best for others around them.

Some would say that one benefit of Utilitarianism is that they would reject the idea that actions are right or wrong because God says so. For those who are not religious, and cannot measure right and wrong in terms of what is written in the guidelines for a religion (i. e. What God declares is right or wrong) this theory is a logical way of evaluating the most useful action for the greater number of people. Religion also can have contrasting moral laws; it is acceptable to have more than one wife in some religions, but in others that is forbidden.

The Hedonic Calculus was devised by Bentham, to calculate whether or not an action would be "right" in terms of Utilitarianism. The Hedonic Calculus considers the duration of the happiness achieved, the intensity of it, the extent of it, the certainty of it, the purity of it, how near in time it will be achieved and its fecundity. This calculus, although it tackles some of the problems of Utilitarianism (such as the certainty of the consequences dilemma) would simply take forever to seriously apply it to every situation.

And sometimes when decisions need to be made quickly, this theory would not be the most practical to follow. We can never see for certain what will happen in the future, we can only try to predict. There might be an unseen consequence to an action, or some unavoidable, unforeseen disaster - and when the consequences of an action determine whether it was "right" or "wrong" this is a considerable problem to face when trying to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

For instance, America and England went to war in Iraq for a perceived good, however it now appears that their information regarding Saddam Hussein's

possession of weapons of mass destruction was incorrect. Has the war actually caused more pain than it has achieved happiness? In my opinion, Utilitarianism is a good ethical theory because it requires people to think about others before themselves and to consider how their actions have consequences on those around them. It also encourages people to assess their actions against an objective and uniform set of criteria.

On the other hand, it is not a flawless theory and every moral code has impracticalities or areas of controversy and debate. Life is so incredibly complex and unpredictable, every situation has a range of possible outcomes, and an infinite number of contributing factors, and there is no guarantee of every factor affecting the happiness/ pain outcome of a decision being previously considered. It is always possible that there are unseen factors affecting the situation, or just far too many to keep track of.