

# [Strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism](https://assignbuster.com/strengths-and-weaknesses-of-utilitarianism/)

The origins of utilitarianism are often traced as far back as the Greek philosopher Epicurus but the main idea is thought to come from Jeremy Bentham who said that Utilitarian argument worked by “ nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.”

There are two main different types of utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism states that, when faced with a choice, we must first consider the likely consequences of potential actions and, from that, choose to do what we believe will generate the most pleasure. The rule utilitarian, on the other hand, begins by looking at potential rules of action. To determine whether a rule should be followed, he looks at what would happen if it were constantly followed.

Utilitarianism is a very solid and stable argument, I personally think that without knowing about it a lot of people use it to decide what to do, my example is what happened when I go home, I have two younger brothers and we always seem to fight over something, usually food, like the last bit of cake, or the last of the coca-cola. What my mum does without realising is a very Utilitarian idea, she says “ Oliver, you take three glasses and pour the coke out equally, then Giles and Theo, you choose”. This way I try to pour all the glasses equally otherwise I get stuck with a really small glass of coke, because my greedy brothers would drink the glass with more in. Utilitarianism uses a lot of separate principles. Someone who accepts some of the principals but not others may be seen as a utilitarian. This mainly includes the whole of the human race.

The Utilitarian argument has the strange ability to seem really obvious to who ever it benefits and completely wrong to the minority that it doesn′t benefit. e. g. rapists. There is another problem that there are no ethical arguments which are agreed by everyone, for example in certain eastern countries, people believe that woman who cheat on there husbands should be stoned to death, where as the general western society believe that this is completely wrong. However there are some points most people agree on. Rape, theft and lying are seen as bad where as, giving, helping and healing are seen as good things

One obvious thing that these things have in common is that most of the things agreed to be good are things which make people happy, and most of the things agreed to be bad are things which make most people miserable.

Bentham realised that there should be some sort of scale on which happiness can be judged. Bentham did this by proposing the hedonic calculus. The hedonic calculus lists seven features of pleasure to which attention must be paid in order to assess how great it is: intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent. This scale allows us to find the act which leads to the greatest pleasure. However there was a Philosopher after Bentham called John Mill, John Mill was a child prodigy who was able to read several languages at an early age, and the son of a follower of Jeremy Bentham. Perhaps the greatest British philosopher of the nineteenth century, Mill maintained that the well being of the individual was of greatest importance and that happiness is most effectively gained when individuals are free to pursue their own ends so long as they keep with the rules that protect the common good of all. While mill accepted the utility principle of the greatest good for the greatest number he was concerned about the difficulty raised when for example there is the story of the bridge operator. The bridge operator took his son to work with him. He delighted in telling his little boy how everything worked and how important his job was, since hundreds of people relied on him to raise and lower this bridge so they could travel safely from place to place. The little boy beamed with pride as his father explained his job. He also greatly admired all of the switches that controlled the huge gears. But after a couple of hours of observing his father work, the boy grew bored, so his father sent him out to play. A short while later, the bridge operator realized that it was almost time for him to lower the bridge so the 5 p. m. commuter train could cross. But, as he was about to pull the switch that would lower the bridge, he glanced out the window to see that his son had apparently been climbing on the gears; and his foot was stuck. In fact, he was wedged between the huge gears; alive, but trapped; and unable to free himself. The engineer was about to hurry to help his son when he heard the train whistle in the distance. Suddenly he realized that he did not have sufficient time to free his son, return to the control box, and lower the bridge in time for the passenger train to cross safely. But if he pulled the switch to lower the bridge, his little boy would be crushed in the massive turning gears in which he was entangled. He was forced to make a horrible choice: either his son would be killed, or a trainload of passengers would plunge to their deaths in the river below. Mill thought if the greatest good for the greatest number was purely quantities based on the quantities of pleasure and pain caused what would stop one persons pleasure from that act. To address this difficulty Mill focused on qualities pleasures. He developed a system of higher and lower pleasures preferring the higher pleasures to the lower ones. Mill said “ It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied: better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied”

Benthams theory has a number of clear benefits. It seems reasonable to link morality with the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of pain and misery and this connection would receive popular support. It also seems natural to consider the consequences of our actions when deciding what to do, utilitarianism offers a balanced democratic morality that promotes the general happiness. However there are a number of difficulties with utilitarianism the first difficulty concerns all theory’s that rely on the consequences for deciding which actions are good. Need to be sure that what I think will come about as a result of particular action will actually come about. Utilitarianism depends upon accurate predictions.