

Utilitarianism and happiness

[Profession](#), [Philosophers](#)



The philosophical theory that I choose to do is called “utilitarianism”. In a brief sentence, utilitarianism means the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Basically what this means is, doing the right thing is based on how many people your action benefits rather than how much it benefits you. According to the Oxford American Dictionary utility means “the state of being useful, profitable, or beneficial”(oxford dictionary, 2013). The whole theory is all about how much it benefits and how useful or profitable an action or an idea is.

For example: if killing one criminal brings forth happiness to a hundred people, then killing that one criminal is not a bad idea. Simply because it makes one hundred people happy. According to utilitarian's the ultimate goal or the most important part of life is to seek happiness. But the happiness that you seek must not only benefit you, but it has to benefit a large sum of the people. This is called the “greatest happiness principle”(Wikipedia, Feb, 11, 2013). Now this is the main idea of utilitarianism, but it does branch out in the different direction due to many philosophers that thought of this theory.

Utilitarianism is not discovered by just one person, it's made up of many ideas from many different philosophers. Although many people believe that utilitarianism started with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, there were philosophers that came up with similar ideas as utilitarianism. Before we talk about the authors of this theory, we must really understand the history of utilitarianism and how it came to be. Way back in history when humans invented writing in the Sumerian Civilization of the Old Babylon, the ancient

Mesopotamian people wrote a poem/story called the “Epic of Gilgamesh” about a friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

In this story there’s a character by the name of Siduri that tells Gilgamesh “Fill your belly. Day and night make merry. Let days be full of joy. Dance and make music day and night”(Wikipedia, Feb, 3, 2013). This quote dates back to the very first advocacy of hedonistic philosophy in the human civilization. It is believed to be written during 2500 – 2000 B. C. A little forward in time and we come to meet Aristippus of Cyrene (435 – 356 BC). Aristippus is a student of one of the greatest philosophers to ever roam the planet, the father of philosophy, Socrates. Though Aristippus didn’t follow in the footsteps of his teacher, he had his own ideas and own theories of philosophy, one of them being hedonism. Aristippus’ idea of hedonism is that all people have the right to do anything to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure. For example: if drinking and doing drugs bring you the greatest amount of pleasure and happiness, then there is nothing wrong in doing so. You may be asking yourself, why I am telling you about the history of hedonism.

So let me explain, in the 18th – 19th century. The British philosopher’s by the name of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill came up with the theory of utilitarianism by taking hedonism of Aristippus and adding the “greatest happiness principle” (Kerby Anderson, 2012). The hedonistic theory of doing anything to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure turned into doing anything to achieve the “greatest good for the greatest number of people” which is now called utilitarianism, this philosophical theory is basically an innovation of hedonism.

Though many philosophers had part in its discovery, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill brought utilitarianism to its true glory, if they didn't explain their philosophy in the way they did. Perhaps I wouldn't be writing this essay right now. So the ones to be credited for utilitarianism is Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. But its not to say that this theory doesn't have its advantages and disadvantages. Like all things in life, there are benefits and there are hindrances. The Advantage of utilitarianism is simply the happiness that you gain from doing something, whether the happiness is for you or someone you care about.

In the end, someone is happy. If you're in confusion on a certain decision and don't know what to do, you can simply apply the greatest happiness theory and make your decision based on that. That way, you don't seem selfish only thinking about your happiness and people will respect that choice and someday repay your kindness by sacrificing their happiness for yours. By sacrificing your happiness for someone else already makes you good human being. Its fits to show that our actions have consequences. If someone cares only about his/her actions alone, he/she wouldn't have many friends ue to the lack to affection and concerns that he/she shows towards others. Another important advantage of utilitarianism is when you're faced with a challenging and difficult task; it gives you the methodology of choosing the right path, the one that will benefit the most people. Instead of questioning how beneficial it will be for you. You begin to value other people's happiness over your own. Therefore giving you the best possible option. Though it is good to put other before you, utilitarianism has its disadvantages as well.

This particular philosophical theory has many disadvantages, but the one that matters to me is. Utilitarian's only care about happiness, whatever brings the greatest amount of people the greatest amount of happiness. Sure, happiness is good, but what about people who don't get that happiness. For example: out of 50 people, 35 of them get happiness. What happens to the other 15 people? Are we to just ignore how they feel? They are humans too, they have feelings as well. We can't abandon them just because the other 35 people are happy. Secondly, if we care about others more than we care about ourselves.

How can we possibly be able to live with ourselves? We can't always be looking out for other people. We have to take care of ourselves as well. In the end, it's our life. We have to look out for ourselves and make the decisions based on how well our life is going to be. There's a saying in the famous movie pirate of the Caribbean " Even a good decision if made for the wrong reasons can be a wrong decision"(Jonathan Pryce, 2003) So, I strongly believe that when it comes to making life changing decisions, we must always put ourselves before others.