

Utilitarianism essay sample



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Utilitarianism is a teleological theory of ethics. The theory began with Jeremy Bentham as a way of working out how good or bad the consequence of an action would be. Bentham was concerned with social and legal reform (the conditions in which people lived and worked were appalling), wanting to develop an ethical theory that established whether something was good or bad according to its benefit for the majority of people. In ‘Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation’ (1789) he establishes this, calling it the principle of utility.

Here, Utility means the usefulness of the results of actions, which is what gives utilitarianism its name, as the latin root word ‘utilis’ means useful. The principle of utility is often expressed as ‘the greatest good of the greatest number’. Bentham defined ‘good’ in terms of pleasure or happiness. An act is right or wrong according to the good or bad consequences. That which is good is that which equals the greatest sum of pleasure and the least sum of pain. Bentham said ‘An act is right if it delivers more pleasure than pain’.

Since it focuses on the greatest number, the theory is quantitative.

Interestingly, it was David Hume (1711-76) who first introduced the concept of utility into ethics, in his essay ‘Why Utility Pleases’, arguing actions are good if they are useful to society. The idea that ‘good’ is defined in terms of pleasure and happiness makes utilitarianism a hedonistic theory. ‘Hedone’ is Greek for pleasure. To help us choose the good thing to do and calculate the possible consequences of an action, Bentham provided the Hedonic (or felicific) calculus.

The amounts of pleasure and pain are measured according to seven criteria: intensity, duration, certainty, fecundity, remoteness (how near/far), richness (will it lead to further pleasures?) and purity (how free from pain?).

Whatever is good or bad can be measured in a quantitative way. Bringing about the greatest pleasure is more important than abiding to rules or laws. For example, in 'Trolleyology', David Edmonds formulates a dilemma. A trolley is about to run over and kill five people attached to a track.

A utilitarian would, given the chance, flick a switch to change the course of the trolley to kill one person instead. Here, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, as the fecundity of saving five lives and one person dying is greater than the fecundity of one life being saved. Bentham's approach later became known as Act Utilitarianism. According to an Act Utilitarian, the principle of utility is applied directly to a particular action in a particular circumstance, thus enabling a flexible, consequentialist, relativist approach.

John Stuart Mill also being a hedonist, accepted that happiness is of the greatest importance. Despite this, he recognized the flaws of Bentham's approach- it is not possible to make an accurate prediction of consequences and pleasure is not the same for everyone. He felt pleasure could not be quantified. In light of this, he defined pleasure more carefully, shifting the emphasis from quantity to quality. Claiming that 'some kinds of pleasures are more desirable and more valuable than others', he made a distinction between higher and lower pleasures.

Higher pleasures are associated with the mind- intellectual pursuits, mental discipline etc. and lower pleasures are associated with the body- satisfying the need for food, water, sleep and sex. The higher pleasures are more desirable than the lower ones, which led to Mill saying ‘ It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied’. So, when Christians were fed to the lions by the Romans, despite the majority involved getting the pleasure of watching Christians being eaten, this is a low, animalistic pleasure, that is outweighed by the higher pleasure of the minority, the Christians, in wanting to survive.

Also, the quality of pleasure that satisfies a human is more important than that which satisfies an animal, so the desires of the lions, and the animalistic pleasures of the romans are rejected. It should be noted that higher and lower pleasures often need to work together, as a lower pleasure can often facilitate a higher pleasure. The lower pleasure of food, for example, is necessary for a healthy, mental mind, which could lead to achieving good results in exams- a higher pleasure.

Mill develops the argument, arguing that in order to derive the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number, we need the principle of universability. Each person desires his own happiness, therefore each person ought to aim at his happiness, and therefore everyone ought to aim at the happiness of everyone. This justifies the greatest happiness principle.

Another aspect to Mill’s approach is the idea that there must be some moral rules in order to establish social order and justice. The rules must be formed using utilitarian principles that if followed universally, would produce the greatest happiness for society.

This was later termed ‘Rule Utilitarianism’. Strong rule utilitarians believe that these derived rules should never be disobeyed. Weak rule utilitarians say that although there should be generally accepted guidelines, they should not always be adhered to indefinitely. There may be situations where the better consequence might be achieved by breaking a rule. A fire engine, for instance, would be able to break the speed limit to put out a fire in an emergency. However, to invoke rule means that the approach becomes deontological not teleological.

Strict rule followers seem irrational, as they would obey a rule, even if disobeying would bring greater happiness. Weak rule followers seem to be no different from Act Utilitarians. Sidgwick criticized Mill’s approach, arguing that it is difficult to properly distinguish between higher and lower pleasures- it is too subjective, If reading Shakespeare and painting produce the same degree of pleasure, there is nothing to choose between them. Sidgwick felt life is more complex, as everything is quantitatively and qualitatively different.

Preference utilitarianism is a recent form of Utilitarianism associated with R. M. Hare, Richard Brandt and Peter Singer. A preference utilitarian judges a moral action according to whether they fit in with the preferences of the individuals involved to achieve the greatest good. Hare argues that in moral decision making we need to consider our own preferences and those of others. ‘Equal preferences count equally, whatever their content’. He says we need to ‘stand in someone else’s shoes’ and try to imagine what someone else might prefer. We should treat everyone, including ourselves, with impartiality.