

# Critique of utilitarianism theory



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Utilitarianism as an independent ethical position only arose in the eighteenth century however fundamental utilitarian ideas can be found in the thoughts of philosophers such as Aristotle. It is a philosophical theory of morality or “how one should act” which has historical roots within the liberal tradition.

The aim of utilitarianism is to make decisions on the basis of a calculation of consequences. As a moral theory, There are however many critiques of utilitarianism which vary as they have different reasons and different targets due to the fact utilitarianism isn't a single coherent theory but a cluster of related theories which have developed throughout the years. In this essay I will be explaining some of the problems with utilitarianism as a theory and discussing whether these problems are insurmountable, for which I think they are.

As a theory, utilitarianism is usually thought to start with Jeremy Bentham, however, similar ideas were evident in the writings of David Hume in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1) and Francis Hutcheson, whom David Hume studied under, in his *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (2). Utilitarianism tells us an act is moral insofar as it creates the greatest good for the greatest number. It tells us to take the amount of happiness distributed between sentient beings and look at which distribution is going to maximise the amount of happiness. It gives a systematic answer. Throughout the past two centuries utilitarianism has been very influential within practical disciplines of politics and economics. As a result, utilitarianism has had an influence modern life, particularly public policy. What could be more important when making political deliberations than aiming to make people's lives better and less unhappy?

One of the first utilitarian theorists, Jeremy Bentham, is famously credited for being the founder of the doctrine. Bentham defined utility as “instrumental to happiness”. He believes that all judgements of good and bad can be based on pleasure and pain. He is seen as an advocate of psychological hedonism. In his famous introduction of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1791), Bentham states “Nature has placed man under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.” Therefore, pain and pleasure provide the basis for his moral theory of ‘what we ought to do’. Initially, he began his career by studying law and then moved on to moral ethics in order to advise legislators. He was primarily interested in improving the law and his goal for the legislator was the utilitarian principle or the greatest happiness principle. Therefore, his advice was not initially aimed for individuals and their life choices but for the legislator. Although Bentham sees pleasure as the key of explaining how human beings act, he relies more often on the concept of pain when constructing his legal theory. While he does endorse act-utilitarianism, his ‘sanction-based’ theory of obligation is more applicable to the legal system he was so interested in improving.

John Stuart Mill is also one of the most well-known utilitarian thinkers and defenders of the theory. His celebrated thoughts can be found in his famous essay: *Utilitarianism*. Mill observes something of a crisis in moral thinking. Philosophical thinkers have been unable to come to a consensus on the principle of what constitutes right and wrong. Mill argues that having such a foundation is necessary to legitimise morality. This is why the theory of utilitarianism is so important.

Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill categorise and measure utility and pleasure in different ways. Bentham uses the hedonic calculus which decides the value of pleasure by seven measures of quantity: duration, intensity, certainty or uncertainty, remoteness or propinquity, fecundity, extent and purity. Bentham is well-known for his treating of all pleasures as of equal value. By this he means not that all pleasures are of exactly equal, but that the legislator who his work on utilitarianism is aimed at should not be valuing one pleasure above another.

John Stuart Mill however saw pleasures in two categories – higher and lower pleasures. A criticism of John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism, and the first problem with the theory that I shall be addressing, is his categorisation of higher and lower pleasures. The difference between these pleasures is founded on sort and not degree, therefore this makes comparison of the consequence of actions far more difficult to calculate. Higher and lower pleasures cannot be measure or compared as they are of a different kind. How would Mill's version of utilitarianism be applied in situations in which both higher and lower pleasures are involved in the calculation?

In relation to John Stuart Mill's classification of higher and lower pleasures, a common criticism of simple versions of the theory such as Bentham's utilitarianism is that “ they reduce the subtleties of human life to a stark calculation of animal-like pleasures, with no concern for how these pleasures are produced.” This gave utilitarianism a bad name and it was often mocked as a “ doctrine only worthy of swine”. (philosophy of the classics, mill utilitarianism). John Stuart Mill defends utilitarianism from such criticism with his version which differs from Jeremy Bentham's “ simple” version: Mill's

differentiation between higher and lower pleasures puts forward that intellectual pleasures are intrinsically more valuable than physical pleasures. Bentham however treats all pleasures as equal to each other. So, when utilitarianism is described as a doctrine worthy only of swine, Mill argues that it is better to be a dissatisfied human being than a satisfied pig; and better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied fool. His defence is that human beings are capable of intellectual pleasures as well as physical ones, whereas pigs cannot enjoy intellectual pleasures. In his view, humans who have experienced intellectual pleasures will prefer them to lower, physical ones. Those who still are led astray by lower physical ones are falling for immediate sensual gratification, even though they know full well that higher, intellectual pleasures are more worthwhile.

John Stuart Mill's idea of higher and lower pleasures has been viewed as flawed in itself. It has been criticised as a self-serving idea. For example, an intellectual will view his preferred enjoyments as a higher, more important pleasure. Therefore, as an intellectual, it could be argued that Mill himself is biased towards what constitutes as higher and lower pleasures.

A further and harsh criticism of utilitarianism is that the theory would justify slavery. This is as long as the slaves were happy or the overall happiness gained by the beneficiaries of the slavery was calculated as more than the slave's unhappiness. Bentham fiercely denies this to be the case, as he argues that the choices of human beings give the best inclination of what makes humans happy, and slavery by definition is never a choice and therefore slaves can never be said to be happy.

Bentham is also well known for his application of utilitarianism as the ‘greatest happiness for the greatest number’. This can subsequently be translated to mean that “utilitarianism sacrifices the unfortunate few the powerful many”. Therefore it has been argued by some that regarding the slavery example mentioned previously; if the vast economic benefits of slavery outweighed the unhappiness of the slave’s then slavery is still favoured by utilitarianism. Bentham argues against this however as he claims “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” should be applied in a way that the interest of the powerless many should be more important than the interests of the powerful few.

Another fundamental criticism of utilitarianism is that it ignores justice. A classic example of this criticism was given by H. J. McCloskey McCloskey, H. J. (1957) An Examination of Restricted Utilitarianism in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Oct., 1957), pp. 466-485. If framing an innocent man for a crime that would reduce the further riots and pain that looking for the real guilty person would incur, utilitarian theory would suggest that this would be the optimal choice as although an innocent man will suffer, for a greater number of people less pain will be caused, incurring in a calculation of more pleasure overall. Therefore, if the sole aim of utilitarian theory is to maximise pleasure and reduce pain for the greater number, justice will be ignored in situations such as this example. Bentham however argues that it is a serious misrepresentation to say that utilitarian’s would be willing to ignore justice and punish an innocent man in the name of the greater good. ADD to bentham’s defence.

Another problem with utilitarianism is the impracticality of calculating the utility of actions in real time. The calculation of utility is said to be self-defeating as by the time the best utilitarian course of action has been calculated and decided, the opportunity to take this action may well have passed. How can one calculate which of all possible actions will maximise the most happiness overall. What if one is in a dilemma and has a decision to make quickly? In high pressure situations, one usually does not have time to sit down and make exact calculations regarding which decision will bring about the most happiness and minimise pain. Mill deflected this objection with the response that humans learn general moral principle through experience that can later be relied on in such situations. Exact calculations are not necessary for each situation in life as this would be impractical. In chapter 2 of his essay Utilitarianism, Mill replies to such criticism: “ In such circumstances, one should follow common-sense moral rules, which summarize lots of human experience, and tend to guide us toward actions that promote general happiness and away from actions that tend to dampen it. Also, one can cultivate habits and train individual character, so that people become disposed to act in ways that are happiness-promoting.” I feel his reply is valid as utilitarianism as a theory is still in use when making decisions in ordinary situations without exact calculations. It is logical to assume common sense moral rules as guidance when making decisions without needing to apply exact calculations.

A further problem of John Stuart Mill’s utilitarianism is that strict application of some utilitarian principles can result in unpalatable consequences. This has been argued by many of utilitarianism critics and there are plentiful

examples of scenarios where consequences of utilitarianism being applied leads to unacceptable consequences.

A great difficulty with utilitarianism is that for one to truly take on a core principle such as the greatest happiness for the greatest number, is very demanding. Everything action an individual undertakes would become a moral obligation to help a greater number of people. It requires the actor to be impartial regarding his own happiness and desires and focus neutrally on the happiness of others over one's own. "as between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator." (J. Mill, Utilitarianism, chapter 2)

What makes this so demanding is the excessive amount of strangers in need of help and the indefinite opportunities there are to make sacrifices to maximise their happiness. This is also a problem as there is no differentiation between helping your friends and family before complete strangers. For example, choosing to work excessively and earn as much money as possible to help those in poverty would be the correct utilitarian choice as it does the most good for the most people. We would become charitable cogs and ignore our human nature to have personal leisure time for example and engage with our individual wants and needs. This ties in with the criticism of utilitarianism that it ignores individuality and individual rights which is a main topic of criticism. As a theory, utilitarianism cannot respect the rights of individuals - Mill defends. Taking into account John Stuart Mill's defence, I personally do not think that utilitarianism looks at individuals as unique and groups people together without regard for their individuality. One would become a martyr for greater happiness, disregarding one's own, apparently



less important wants, needs and desires. Utilitarian thinkers argue that the world would in fact be a much better place if we did live by principle. I disagree and feel that in this sense utilitarianism is overly demanding and has a lack of respect for individual rights. This is a key problem with the theory that I do not believe is insurmountable as it would deter individuals from engaging with the theory.

Act-utilitarianism is too demanding Therefore critics of utilitarian argue this overly demanding theory would leave one with a life of hardship and austerity.

Bernard Williams is an infamous critic of utilitarian theory. He states that we need a sense of integrity and commitments to justify any morality. He effectively argues that utilitarianism misses moral agency. His example of this problem with utilitarianism is the differentiation between an act and the consequence. It is hard to justify that the action rather than a possibly terrible consequence is what makes an action immoral. Too much egoistic weight is placed on personal actions. For example, the action of shooting someone with a gun rather than the victim dying is what is wrong with such a scenario for a utilitarian. Williams argues that we do not judge actions by their consequences and this notion of utilitarianism should be rejected no matter how plausible it may seem. Williams believes this way of judgement removes what it is to be “ human” from the scenario. Moral decision should preserve our psychological identity and integrity.

John Stuart Mills’s proof of utilitarianism has also come under constant criticism. His answer the question ‘ why maximise happiness?’ is

controversial. Mill's claim is that happiness is pursued as an end in itself and is the aim of all human activity. If someone claims that they pursue virtue as an end in itself, Mill argues that this is just an ingredient in their life of happiness and just a means leading to the same end: happiness, pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Virtue is just part of their happiness. So for Mill, the question of 'why maximise happiness?' is in fact a question of why happiness is desirable. His analogous answer to this is that "The only way we can prove an object is visible is by demonstrating that people can actually see it." Therefore the evidence that happiness is desirable is that people desire it. This evidence of proof has come under much criticism as it is argued by Henry Sidgwick that it is based on a bad argument. First of all he criticises the comparison of what is desirable and what is visible. Visible means 'can be seen' however desirable doesn't actually translate to 'can be desired'. In fact it is more correctly translated to mean 'should be desired'. This weakness of John Stuart Mill's analogy makes it hard to compare what people do desire to what people should desire. Therefore, his proof of happiness being desirable is based fully on bad argument. As the fundamental aim of utilitarianism is to maximise happiness, the fact that Mill has difficulty proving that happiness is what the people desire is a fundamental problem with the theory that I do not feel can be ignored.

It is also argued that if John Stuart Mill had given a correct analogy, his argument would have led to a selfish version of utilitarianism compared to the utilitarian approach that the greatest happiness for the greatest number is its aim. In Mill's example, individuals wanting their own personal happiness will add up to an aggregate happiness. Therefore, it is argued he needs a far

stronger argument than his given analogy to prove that general happiness is what all people should aim for.

It is clear that utilitarianism, although often considered a simple theory which declares that the morally right action in any circumstances is the one which is most likely to maximise happiness, is actually a very complex cluster of related theories which have developed rapidly since the 18th century. Throughout this time many features of utilitarianism have come under constant criticism and as a normative theory it has been widely accused of being unworkable. I do believe that utilitarianism has flaws which John Stuart Mill as the theory's key defender has been unable to explain adequately. A lot of Mill's utilitarianism is defensible such as how he deals with the objection that the calculations are impractical. However some of his answers to criticism do not persuade me that the problems with utilitarianism are surmountable. I sympathise with the criticism that utilitarianism is overly demanding and following rule utilitarianism strictly would lead to a life of austerity and self-denial. As a moral basis for some decision making I think utilitarianism could have use in society today, however, as moral theory I do not think that it upholds and the problems within it are insurmountable. The criticisms I have mentioned in this essay are not exhaustive.