

# Utilitarianism theory summary and evaluation



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that is generally credited to Jeremy Bentham. Bentham and John Stuart Mill are seen to be the two leading exponents of the theory. Mill, writing after Bentham, adapted some of his ideas into a slightly different version of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory, which means that it decides on what is right or wrong solely on the consequences of an action or the circumstances that this action brings about. The theory is relative, it judges situations separately and does not impose set rules of guidelines on actions to be observed in every case. This avoids the major problems one sees with absolutist theories such as Natural law or Kantian ethics. What is right is what brings about pleasure and Thomas Carlyle raised the criticism that it is a “doctrine worthy only of swine” as a direct criticism of this. What Carlyle is saying is that those adhering to a utilitarian way of morality are only satisfying basic desires and are just ‘animals’. As humans with reason and intelligence it seems Carlyle wants more out of an ethical theory than what Utilitarianism gives. I will discuss Bentham’s utilitarianism and then Mill’s adaptation in an attempt to show Mill escapes the problems faced by Bentham.

Bentham saw humanity as being completely centered around two things. “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.” For this reason his ethical theory is entirely concerned with the two. Bentham saw it that everyone wants pleasure and nobody wants pain. From this he derived the principle of utility which was that the good is whatever brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. What is right to do in every situation is bring about the most pleasure and minimise the pain. Every moral dilemma is judged individually

as even though the circumstances may be familiar to ones we have faced before there are always variables, for example in the size of the group effected. So what was right to do in a previous situation may not be the best thing to do in the new situation we are faced with. Bentham understood that all situations are different and created a way of comparing levels and pain and pleasure brought about by a decision with a system of calculation.

Bentham called this the felicific calculus. Each situation would be judged on seven criteria: Intensity (how strong the pleasure is), duration (how long it lasts), certainty or uncertainty of the pain or pleasure, propinquity (how soon the pleasure will occur), fecundity (the question of whether an action will be followed with similar good circumstances, purity (that it wont be followed by sensations of a negative kind) and finally the extent of the pleasure. In the felicific calculus any individual counts as one, he did not discriminate.

Bentham proposes that in every situation we look at all these fields and through doing so we could calculate whether one action would be better than a different one. For example if the extent of the pleasure in the long run outweighs a temporary disadvantage or negative situation then the action is right. One may argue that his attempt to turn morality into a type of math is in fact impractical, will we always have the time to weigh up all the issues surrounding our action. Also how can we really measure pleasure, we can't easily attempt to do it in units.

Bentham was anti-elitist in the sense that he saw everyones pleasure to count as the same and saw all types of pleasure under the title ' pleasure'. He argued himself that ' pushpin is as good as poetry'. This is where Carlyle is criticising him. He sees utilitarianism to be promoting a lifestyle that is

very unattractive in the sense of only catering for your basic needs and desires. For example through this type of utilitarianism one can justify stealing in a lot of cases and things like sleeping around. As long as you are happy and maximising your pleasure then you are doing the right actions. Bentham himself would argue that it is better to be this type of person satisfied than an individual attempting to be more virtuous dissatisfied. As animals do not possess reason or intelligence like humans all they do is satisfy their basic urges. Carlyle was saying that we have this ability to consider further our own actions and be far more compassionate than Bentham seemed to be saying we can be and for this reason he saw utilitarian ideas as acceptable only to animals. One example given to display this is a situation in which a number of guards holding a prisoner are beating him. As there are more guards beating than people being beaten the suffering is outweighed and so the clearly immoral act being done by the guards is accepted. Obviously it is not in all cases that Bentham's ideas justify immoral actions but for the sole reason that it does justify them at times it is strongly criticised. Utilitarianism can be seen as quite the opposite, as a very compassionate theory, with the example of widely disputed topic of euthanasia. Utilitarians could argue that killing someone to save them from years of potential suffering is the right thing to do. They are taking into account the desires of the individual and by weighing up pain and pleasure to come to a compassionate conclusion.

Nevertheless, Carlyle's criticism is a very strong one and in the face of it this where J. S. Mill's adaption can be promoted. Mill, attracted by Bentham's theory, still saw this great problem with it and attempted to change parts of

it to counter the issue. Mill did this by describing 'happiness' as being the thing we are seeking instead of 'pleasure'. He still saw this idea of there as being one sole intrinsic good but instead of it being a purely physical pleasure he looked at it in a different way: happiness as a mental pleasure. For what is good and what one desires are different things. This more virtuous attempt at utilitarian thinking promotes mental pleasure often over physical pleasure. Mill thought that my seeing all pleasure as equal was a fundamental problem with Bentham's thinking so he believed that by discriminating between different types of pleasure and in turn ordering them he could start to move away from the unattractiveness of Bentham's utilitarianism. He stated that he did not see pushpin as being equal to poetry. Mill was involving a sense of dignity that he believed all of us had and argued that physical pleasure would in many cases be rated below mental pleasures and so straight away we can see the improvement he has made to the theory in light of Carlyle's criticism. Returning to the previous situation in which we see the prisoner being beaten for the pleasure of the guards, now with these higher and lower order pleasures, things are different. Now the utilitarian can argue that the sadistic pleasure the guards are getting out of the beating would rate much lower than say the mental pleasure that comes with being a compassionate human being. So now the suffering of the prisoner outweighs the marginal pleasure, in comparison to a theory with no higher or lower order pleasure, so the act is not justified. Mill said himself that it was "better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied" and "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied". Through seeking out mental pleasure or physical ones Mill would argue we are acting in the 'right' way.

It would be obvious in many cases which pleasure rates over another, for example sadistic pleasure being badly rated. However one big criticism of Mill is that there are too many situations in which it is too hard to discriminate as to which pleasure rates over the other. One rather tedious example is the question of whether the music of Bach is equal to that of Mozart. Still the criticism raised is an issue. Mill argued for the idea of competent judgement, he stated that one could see if a pleasure was higher than another if the majority of a group of competent judges, one was competent to judge if they had experienced both pleasures in question, came to the decision that it rated over the other. Although Mill is trying to promote right moral action he undoubtedly faces some difficulty in doing so through his utilitarian approach. A label applied to Mill's thinking after his time was 'Rule' utilitarianism. This terminology comes about from Mill's discussion that from our past experiences we saw it plausible to adhere once again to certain behaviour or decisions that in the past were seen to bring about or promote a great sense of happiness. If the action is always good in different circumstances then we can create for ourselves a type of 'rule' which is that we should always do this certain action in every situation. Bentham was described as being an 'Act' utilitarian as he saw the opposite: every situation should be judged independently every time. Whether or not these labels are a fair representation of the two different theories within utilitarianism is questionable but the strange sense of the utilisation of absolute ideas is interesting. His adaption tries to compensate for the lack of absolutism that is often felt to be essential when looking for a good code of ethics. One example would be promoting truth telling. One should always tell the truth as it brings about peace of mind and is recognised as the morally

<https://assignbuster.com/utilitarianism-theory-summary-and-evaluation/>

right thing to do a lot of the time. However by appealing to the idea of absolutism this section of his thinking takes on the burdens that absolutism bears. There are always certain situations in which the absolute law seems like the worst thing to do; the extreme example used by Kant of not lying to a murderer who is going to kill your friend and asking his whereabouts would seem like a completely immoral act. Also Mill is criticised for falling short in the exact same way that Bentham has. Mill does not discuss the distribution of happiness and similarly we could see his theory allowing unjust or undeserved unhappiness. In terms of number, could we increase the number of sadistic prison guards to an extent where the scale tips back over to the other side again?

Through looking at the charge that utilitarianism is 'a doctrine worthy only of swine' I also see it necessary to show that Mill offered proof for the principle of utility. He argued that happiness is desirable as an end, stating that something was desirable if people can see it and in the same way something was desirable if people desire it. People do actually desire happiness. Through showing that everyone's happiness is desirable and only happiness is desirable as an end I think that Mill is showing that his version of utilitarianism is not 'a doctrine worthy only of swine' instead it is an ethical code promoting a good sense of living. It is true that Mill has succeeded where Bentham appears to have failed so when discussing the charge I do not think you could answer in way that is so black and white. I would argue that this charge against Bentham's theory is not undeserved as it seems foolish to be basing a code of morality on the concept of physical pleasure. When looking at this charge against Mill's adapted version I see it

as ungrounded. What Mill is trying to Promote is a virtuous code of living in which some one acts in what is considered across the board to be a morally good way of living. I see Mill's writing to be worthy of far more than merely swine.

Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch-' The Puzzle Of Ethics'. Pages 63-72 and 81-83, 1999

John Cottingham-' Western Philosophy and Anthology'. Pages 512-517, 2008

J. S Mill-' Utilitarianism and On Liberty: Including ' Essay on Bentham' and Selections from the Writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin'. Pages 12 - 16

John Rawls- ' Classical utilitarianism', ' Theory of justice', pages 22-27, Oxford , 1971

pages 22-27