

Moral Philosophy :

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a moral theory that was developed by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).

It is a *teleological* or *consequentialist* theory. Actions are judged to be good or bad by looking at their consequences.

Utilitarianism claims that the right actions are those that maximize utility. (Utility is usually defined as happiness).

Mill described utilitarianism as follows:

The creed which accepts as the foundations of morals "utility" or the "greatest happiness principle" holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure

John Stuart Mill – Utilitarianism (1863)

It seems then that utilitarianism is a very simple theory to apply. When faced with a moral dilemma, the agent has to:

- a) decide which options are available to her
- b) calculate the happiness likely to be produced by each action
- c) act in the way that will produce the most happiness

It is important to remember that the agent's own happiness counts the same as everybody else's. The agent should try to be as impartial as possible.

Utilitarianism is viewed as attractive by some because:

- 1) There is no need to appeal to God to determine what is morally right
- 2) It is grounded in human experience. Most people want to be happy.
- 3) It can be seen as democratic in that no one person's happiness is said to count for more than anyone else's.

Think of current moral issues such as euthanasia and animal welfare. What would a utilitarian have to say about these?

Problems with utilitarianism

Despite its initial appeal, utilitarianism has been criticized in many ways. Below is a summary of the main criticisms:

- 1) **It has counterintuitive implications.** In other words, utilitarianism may condone actions that clash with our commonsense (intuitive) ideas of morality. For example,
 - a. Utilitarianism may condone the execution of an innocent person if this maximized overall happiness. It seems to clash with our understanding of rights. In this example, the right not to be punished if innocent.
 - b. The actions of a “peeping tom” may be condoned if the victims are unaware that they are being watched and the perpetrator is made happy by his actions. We feel that the actions of the peeping tom are wrong but it seems that utilitarianism is unable to condemn them.
- 2) **The consequences of an action are difficult to calculate.** It is often claimed that it is difficult, if not impossible, to predict the consequences of an action with any real degree of accuracy. Can I be sure that my actions will have the effect that I believe they will? Should we base something as important as morality on consequences that are difficult to predict?
- 3) **Can happiness be quantified?** Is happiness the kind of thing that can be measured with any precision? Can I really compare different levels of happiness in the way that I can compare a physical property, such as temperature?
- 4) **Is happiness really that important?** Is happiness the only thing that we value as important? Are there some things that are more important (e.g. human rights, truthfulness...)?
- 5) **Morality should look backwards as well as forwards.** When making moral decisions, should we only look to the future (i.e. the consequences)? What about promises we have made in the past? Shouldn't these past actions have some bearing on how we ought to act?

Try to imagine how a utilitarian may respond to these criticisms.

Modifications to Utilitarianism

Mill argued that utilitarianism should not be viewed as a crude theory that did not distinguish between the differing types of happiness. He claimed that there were two types of pleasures, the higher pleasures and the lower pleasures:

If I am asked, what I mean by difference of quality in pleasures, or what makes one pleasure more valuable than another, merely as a pleasure, except its being greater in amount, there is but one possible answer. Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account.....

.....Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with, and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying, both, do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties. Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals, for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs. They would not resign what they possess more than he for the most complete satisfaction of all the desires which they have in common with him.

Mill, Utilitarianism (1863)

Mill claimed that the higher pleasures, the pleasures that result from intellectual activities (e.g. reading and writing poetry, philosophical analysis) are far superior to the lower pleasures, those pleasures that result from bodily activities (e.g. eating, drinking, having sex)

The job of the utilitarian agent is to maximize the higher pleasures wherever possible.

Is such a distinction between higher and lower pleasures a useful one to make? Why should higher pleasures be viewed as superior to lower pleasures? Do you agree with Mill's reasoning?

Would maximizing the higher rather than lower pleasures provide us with more acceptable solutions to moral dilemmas?

Rule Utilitarianism

One strand of utilitarianism, called rule utilitarianism, claims that morality should involve following rules (e.g. always tell the truth, don't punish innocent people etc.) and that these rules should be chosen because of their tendency to maximize happiness.

Although lying in some situations does maximize happiness, it is probably true that lying in general decreases overall happiness (imagine a world where everybody lied). A rule utilitarian may suggest that everybody follow the rule "do not lie" because if everybody followed this rule, the world would be a happier place.

Note the important difference here. The moral agent no longer has to calculate the possible consequences of each option available to her. She now has to simply follow a rule that has been decided because of its overall tendency to promote happiness.

Rule utilitarianism can be seen as combining the absolute rules of the deontological approach to ethics with the utilitarian emphasis on maximizing happiness.

How might a rule utilitarian respond to the claim that utilitarianism would condone counterintuitive actions, such as executing innocent people?