

Utilitarianism is a **consequentialist theory** of ethics. Thus, it is the consequences of an action that make the action right or wrong. NO action is intrinsically right or wrong. The action that has the best consequences *for all affected* by the action is morally right. The action that has bad consequences / fewer good consequences *for all affected* is morally wrong. (Notice that it is the consequences *for all affected* by the action – not merely for the actor, as in ethical egoism, or for some select group.)

The ‘basic logic’ of the theory is: *Morally right actions are those actions that produce the greatest good / benefit for the greatest number of people.* Few actions can benefit everyone. Most actions will probably harm someone. So choose the action that has the best consequences for the largest number of those persons affected by the action.

The origins of the theory are in the British philosophers **Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)** and **John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)**. Both of these philosophers affirmed ‘**hedonism**’: the view that people are motivated to avoid pain and to experience pleasure – that pleasure is the highest positive human motive and value. But they were advocates of ‘**social hedonism**’ – it is not the pleasure / pain of the individual that is of concern ethically, but the pleasure / pain of the group / society that is of ethical concern.

Bentham held that pleasures cannot be distinguished based upon their quality or type, but only upon the **basis of quantity** – how much pleasure they produce for how many. He even tried to measure pleasures based upon a ‘hedonistic calculus’ (how strong the pleasure, how long the pleasure, how many experiencing the pleasure, etc.) He held that “Pushpin (a children’s game that gives childish pleasure) is as good as poetry (an adult activity that gives adult pleasures.)

John Stuart Mill held that pleasures could be distinguished **based upon their quality** or type. He held that : “It is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.” (Rational human dissatisfaction is qualitatively better than animal, physical pleasure.)

Act Utilitarianism holds that it is *each individual action* that must be judged by its utility in producing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. (Sometimes you will tell the truth because that instance of truth-telling would have the best consequences. But other times you would tell a lie if that act of falsehood-telling would produce the greatest good for the greatest number.)

Rule Utilitarianism holds that it is *rules of action* that should be judged and chosen by their utility in producing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. One might well choose the rule “Tell the truth – honesty is the best policy.” In individual cases, one would apply the rule and tell the truth because one judges that telling the truth will, over-all, produce the greatest good for the greatest number. Most utilitarians today are rule utilitarians.

Many of **our laws and social policies** are based upon a utilitarian justification. They do not benefit everyone equally. They may even inflict injustice upon some, But they are believed to produce the greatest benefit for society than other laws / policies - that is their justification.

A **strength** of utilitarianism is that it affirms that the *consequences of our actions are very important* and should be of concern to us in evaluating what is right or wrong. A theory that holds that consequences are irrelevant to the rightness / wrongness of an action seems to many of us implausible.

Another **strength** of utilitarianism is its *social concern*. We should care / be concerned with how our actions affect (benefit or harm) all who are affected by our actions.

One **problem** with utilitarian / consequentialist theory is that we often *lack knowledge of the future consequences* of our actions. Sometimes the good results we anticipate from our actions do not happen. Sometimes bad consequences occur despite our attempts at good results. Often, both good and bad consequences result. If an action is morally right / justified by the consequences of the action, but we cannot be sure of the consequences, how are we really to know that the action is the morally justified / right one?

Another **problem** is that the logic of consequentialist / utilitarian thinking would seem to *justify violations of 'common sense morality' and committing injustice* to individuals or minority groups if those actions would produce benefit for the majority. There would seem to be little room for 'inalienable rights' of individuals or minorities that cannot be violated no matter what.

Another **problem** of utilitarian thinking is that it is "*too demanding*." It would seem that the individual should always be sacrificing their good /benefit for the good of others. If I have \$50 to spend on a date with my wife, and I think of a way that the \$50 could be used to provide a greater benefit to more people – surely I can. (Give it to the Star of Hope Mission to feed and shelter poor people.) Does this mean that to spend money on the happiness of myself and my wife would always be unethical?