

UTILITARIANISM

UTILITARIANISM

In its simplest form, utilitarianism is defined by three claims.

1. What is right? Actions are morally right or wrong depending on their consequences and nothing else. An act is right if it maximises what is good. This is 'act consequentialism'
2. What is good? The only thing that is good is happiness, understood as pleasure and the absence of pain. This is 'hedonism'
3. Who counts? No one's happiness counts more than anyone else's. This is a commitment to equality

This is known as hedonistic act utilitarianism. If we put (1) and (2) together, we see that the theory claims that an action is right if it maximises happiness. Otherwise the action is wrong. Our actions are judged not 'in themselves', e.g what type of action they are (lie, helping someone, ect) but in terms of what consequences they have. Our actions are morally right if they bring about the greatest happiness

'Greatest happiness' is comparative (great, greater, greatest). If an action leads to the greatest happiness of those it affects, no other action taken at that time could have led to greater happiness. So an action is right only if, out of all the actions you could have done, this action leads to more happiness than any other. Just causing some happiness, or more happiness than unhappiness, isn't enough for an act to be morally right.

Act utilitarianism seems to provide a clear and simple way of making decisions: consider the consequences of the different actions you could perform and choose that action that brings about, or is likely to bring about, the greatest happiness. It makes complicated decisions easy and avoids appeals to controversial moral intuitions. The only thing that matters is happiness, and surely everyone wants to be happy. We can figure out empirically how much happiness actions cause, and so we can solve moral issues by empirical investigation.

BENTHAM'S QUANTITATIVE HEDONISTIC UTILITARIANISM

'THE PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY' Jeremy Bentham is considered the first act utilitarianism. He defended the 'principle of utility', also known as the 'greatest happiness principle'. It is 'that principle which states the greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question, as being the right and proper...end of human action'.

So Bentham claims that in judging actions to be morally right or wrong, we should take into account only the total amount of happiness that the action may produce. Likewise, in our own actions, we should aim to produce the greatest happiness we can.

THE MEANING OF 'UTILITY' Utilitarianism is so-called because it is concerned with 'utility'. Bentham states that 'by utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness or to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered .

'a thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures or to diminish the sum total of his pains

So, something has 'utility' if it contributes to your happiness, which is the same as what is in your interest. And happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain. The claim that pleasure, as happiness, is the only good is known as hedonism. Bentham goes on to list fourteen 'families' of pleasure, such as sensory pleasure, the pleasures of exercising one's skills, the pleasures of having power, the pleasures of memory, and the pleasures of benevolence. He also lists twelve families of pain, many deriving from similar sources as pleasure

MEASURING PLEASURE AND PAIN

Bentham argued that we can measure pleasures and pains and add them up on a single scale by a process he called the 'felicific calculus', also known as the 'hedonic calculus' or 'utility calculus'. If a pleasure is more intense, will last longer, is more certain to occur, will happen

sooner rather than later, or will produce in turn many other pleasures and few pains, it counts for more. In thinking what to do, you also need to take into account how many people will be affected (the more you affect positively, and the fewer you affect negatively, the better). The total amount of happiness produced is the sum total of everyone's pleasures minus the sum total of everyone's pains. As this demonstrates, Bentham took a quantitative approach to happiness.

The reasons to believe utilitarianism rest in its intuitive appeal. Everyone cares about happiness (Bentham claims that the only things that motivate people are pleasure and pain) Morality is about how to act, so it better be about what motivates us. So it is about happiness. If happiness is good, then surely it is reasonable to think that more happiness is better. So we should maximise happiness. And until we have a good reason to think otherwise, treating people as equal is an appealing moral starting point.

However, Bentham's normative ethical theory may also strike us as too simple. Even if we think that morality has something to do with happiness, we might want to reject utilitarianism. We will look at these objections and more after we look at how John Stuart Mill developed and deepened Bentham's theory

MILL ON UTILITARIANISM

MILL'S QUALITATIVE HEDONISTIC UTILITARIANISM What is happiness? Mill agrees with Bentham that happiness is pleasure and the absence of pain.

But the exact relation between pleasure and happiness needs further clarification. Happiness is not 'a continuity of highly pleasurable excitement', a life of rapture, 'but moments of such, in an existence made up of few and transitory pains, many and various pleasures, with a decided predominance of the active over the passive, and having as the foundation of the whole, not to expect more from life than it is capable of bestowing'. Thus variety, activity and realistic expectations play an important role in how our pleasures make up our happiness.

Is happiness, understood like his, attainable? Yes, says Mill, many people can experience it. The main obstacles are a poor education and poor social arrangements that lead to lack of

opportunity and inequality. Of course, we can't expect good fortune all the time - we will all experience disease and the loss of people we love. But the main sources of human suffering are things that we can diminish over time.

Does utilitarianism degrade human beings in valuing only pleasure? Mill sympathises with the objection applied to Bentham's view of happiness. Bentham didn't really understand human nature, Mill argues 'If he thought at all of any of the deeper feelings of human nature, it was but as idiosyncrasies of taste'. According To Bentham's felicific calculus, 'quantity of pleasure being equal, push pin is as good as poetry'. Mill rejects the view that pleasure and pains are equally valuable, he provides an alternative account of human nature that answers the objection

HIGHER AND LOWER PLEASURES Mill argues that the claim that utilitarianism degrades human beings misunderstands what human beings take pleasure in. Some types of pleasure are 'higher' than others, more valuable, more important to human happiness, given the types of creatures we are and what we are capable of.

Which pleasures? How can we tell if a type of pleasure is more valuable (quality) than another, rather than just more pleasurable (quantity)? The answer has to be to ask people who know what they are talking about. If everyone (or almost everyone) who has experience of two types of pleasure prefers one type to the other, then the type that they prefer is more valuable. To ensure that they are considering the quality and not quantity of the pleasure, we should add another condition . A pleasure is higher only if people who have experience of both types of pleasure prefer one even if they would choose it over a greater quantity of the other type of pleasure.

Mill argues that, as long as our physical needs are met, people will prefer the pleasures of thought, feeling and imagination to pleasures of the body and the senses, even though our higher capacities also mean we can experience terrible pain, boredom and dissatisfaction. For example, 'tis better to have loved and loved and lost than never to have loved at all'. We can say the same about intelligence and artistic creativity - better to have the pleasures that they bring, even though they cause us pain and distress, than to be unintelligent or lack creativity.

Thus Mill compares a human being with a pig. (objection claims that valuing only pleasure is 'a doctrine worthy of swine') As human beings, we are able to experience pleasures of deep personal relationships, art and creative thought that pigs are not.

'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied' This preference, Mill thinks, derived from our sense of dignity, which is an essential part of our happiness.

In introducing this distinction between higher and lower pleasures, Mill rejects the felicific calculus, and adds the element of quality to the quantitative analysis of happiness that Bentham puts forward.

It is important to note that if Mill's prediction here is wrong - if people with the relevant experience do not prefer the pleasures of thought, feeling and imagination to other pleasures, then these are not higher pleasures. So we can object that people do not reliably pursue the 'higher' pleasures of thought, feeling and imagination instead of the 'lower' pleasures related to the body and the senses.

Mill accepts the point, but argues that it is no objection. First, there is a difference between preference and action. We can choose what we know to be less good, whether from weakness of will or laziness or other factors. We still recognise that what we did not choose is more valuable.

Second, appreciating the higher pleasures can be more demanding. Our ability to experience higher pleasures can be undermined by hard work, lack of time, infrequent opportunities to experience them, and so on. We may seek lower pleasures simply because those are more readily available to us.

Not just anyone's preference counts as deciding whether a pleasure is 'higher' or 'lower'. As with any question, we need to consult people who know what they are talking about. Having been to an art gallery one does not count as having experienced the pleasures of art. Mill says that one pleasure is higher than another if almost everyone who is competently acquainted with both prefers one over the other.
