

Utilitarianism Evaluated

Principle of Utility – greatest good for the greatest number	If it is good to help one person, it must be better to help ten people. Try to help as many people as you can – that seems a good rule.
Teleological – it is the telos (end or goal) of moral action, not the act itself or the moral rule you follow, that is good or of value	This is seen as a positive aspect to the theory. Utilitarianism tries to make the world a better place. Bentham and Mill were both concerned with political reforms such as the welfare state that improved society.
Consequentialist – moral judgements should be based solely on outcomes	Consequentialism is summed up as “the ends justify the means”. Some people disagree. It is easy to give examples of bad actions that lead to good consequences (e.g. hospitalising someone in a fight who turns out to have a tumour that they treat). The consequences of an action don’t make the action right; the consequences cannot be predicted; even if you knew for certain what would happen, you couldn’t calculate the consequences for everyone.

Bentham

Hedonistic – humans desire pleasure and seek to avoid pain. <i>“Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.”</i>	This statement is attacked on two counts. Firstly, we desire a range of things – some people actively seek pain! Secondly, the naturalistic fallacy comes in here – just because we <i>do</i> desire pleasure doesn’t mean we <i>should</i> .
Quantitative - <i>“Quantity of pleasure being the same, pushpin is as good as poetry”</i>	This makes any calculation easier. All pleasure has the same value. Mill disagreed (see Mill).
Hedonic Calculus: DURATION REMOTENESS PURITY RICHNESS INTENSITY CERTAINTY EXTENT	A very practical system for working out the utility (usefulness) of a course of action. If you thought about it yourself, you’d come up with a similar list. To work out how much pleasure, you need to know how long it lasts, how many people feel the pleasure, how strong the pleasure is etc. Some say it’s too hard to add it all up, but it is in line with how we work when deciding, for example, how to spend lottery money. “Only a few people will benefit from the Opera.” Etc.
Act Utilitarian – each situation should be assessed separately	On the plus side, the theory is flexible and allows you to do the ‘right thing’ in each situation. However, it is impractical. You can’t work out all of the effects of every moral choice you make.
Rule of thumb – if a decision greatly resembles a previous decision, you can use it as a ‘rule of thumb’ to avoid doing the hedonic calculus in detail again	This answers some of the criticisms aimed at Act Utilitarianism. We act this way in non-ethical situations, e.g. business decisions, and cope with consequences being incalculable, immeasurable and unpredictable.
Reduce pain first - before increasing pleasure (Bentham). Karl Popper suggested a Negative Utilitarianism that purely aimed to reduce as much pain as possible	True, it is far better to reduce one person’s pain than increase one person’s pleasure. It would be better to have ten people not enjoying themselves than five having fun while five others suffered. It is hard to equate pleasure and pain though.
“Everyone to count for one , and no-one to count for more than one”	Although this may seem obvious, in Bentham’s society only the rich got good medical care, education etc. Even today there are some who think they are more important because of status, power etc. Bentham disagrees.
Precedent – if your act has good consequences but will set a precedent leading to bad things in the future, do not do that	This almost sounds like rule utilitarianism, and Bentham clearly sees the possible problems of his theory. We do need rules in society, and must bear in mind the ‘rules’ or precedent we will be setting when we act.

Mill

Qualitative – not merely the amount of pleasure/pain. We can make judgments about which pleasures are greater in kind, not just degree, as outlined below.	This answers the criticism that sadistic guards might be right to torture someone for pleasure – theirs is a worthless sort of pleasure. This also moves away from hedonism.
Higher and lower pleasures – <i>‘Better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied’</i> Intellectual pleasures were seen by Mill to be superior to sensual pleasures.	This improves Bentham’s Hedonic Calculus. Reading a good book doesn’t just give me <i>more</i> pleasure than playing Angry Birds – it gives me <i>better</i> pleasure. However, some people accuse Mill of being a snob, and others of being entirely subjective.
Competent Judge – <i>“On a question which is the best worth having of two pleasures, the judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both must be admitted as final.”</i>	People disagree about different pleasures – some would choose a long walk, others to sit and watch football. It’s not clear that competent judges would agree with each other at all. This may explain why modern Utilitarians tend to be Preference Utilitarians.
Happiness – Mill developed Aristotle’s concept of ‘eudaimonia’. Happiness includes a richness of life and complexity of activity – a variety of pleasures leads to a better quality of happiness.	A point missed out on by Bentham. My first sweet gives much more pleasure than my tenth. A really happy life means one that is full of different pleasures. Aristotle thought Virtues were good in themselves, but Mill says they were only a means to the end of Happiness, which is what everyone desires.
Rule Utilitarian – <i>“Act in accordance with those rules which, if generally followed, would provide the greatest general balance of pleasure over pain.”</i> (although as Mill said it was sometimes necessary to break the rules, some label him a Soft Rule Utilitarian)	This is much more practical than Act Util. Also in line with how society works. However, Mill says "...to save a life, it may not only be allowable, but a duty, to steal, or take by force, the necessary food or medicine, or to kidnap, and compel to officiate, the only qualified medical practitioner." How do you know if breaking a rule will lead to the greater good?
Liberty - <i>“Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign”</i> . This goes with the Harm Principle : if someone is causing no harm to others, they should be free to do as they choose.	This could be seen as saying that having freedom will lead to a happier society. Some say this goes against the theory, because letting someone use drugs and harm themselves will lead to less happiness for that person and therefore less overall happiness. It isn’t clear that individual liberty is compatible with utilitarianism.
Justice – Treating everyone as having equal value, and trying to bring about the greater good, is "the highest abstract standard of social and distributive justice."	This answers a criticism that Utilitarianism is unfair – e.g. that it would allow us to torture an innocent person if it saved hundreds of lives. However, some people think Mill is unsuccessful, and that torturing innocent people is wrong even if it leads to ‘distributive justice’.

Singer

Preferences – “I approach each issue by seeking the solution that has the best consequences for all affected... that which satisfies the most preferences, weighted in accordance with the strength of the preferences.”	In many ways an improvement on earlier forms of Utilitarianism, as people often choose things that don’t make them happy. However, it is not clear how to weight one preference against another, and fulfilled preferences are even harder to add up than pleasure and pain.
Interests – Most animals cannot have preferences, so we should act in accordance with their interests. If you ignore the interests of animals (e.g. by eating factory-farmed meat), you are being speciesist .	It’s not always clear how to give ‘equal consideration’ to animals. Can I still kill and eat a chicken as long as it lived a good life? However, Singer’s views transformed society in the 1970s, and gave a rational justification to animal rights protestors.