

Ethics at a Glance

Utilitarianism

British philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) are credited with the origins of classical utilitarianism, a moral theory that defines a moral act solely in terms of the outcome or consequences of that act. This teleological perspective is based on a single guiding principle. The **principle of utility**, also referred to as the Greatest Happiness Principle, states that actions are right if they produce the greatest balance of happiness over unhappiness (Mill, 1861). Over time, the definition of happiness has been expanded to include a variety of intrinsic goods other than happiness or pleasure. Intrinsic goods are goods or conditions that are inherently valuable and might include love, beauty, friendship, knowledge, and success. Some writers contend the principle of utility can also refer to individual preferences.

In any given situation, we are likely to have to consider a range of goods and preferences to determine what will constitute the greatest overall balance of good. This consideration uses a type of moral cost/benefit analysis in which a moral act should produce the greatest benefit (happiness) at the least cost (unhappiness). A moral act may, at times, result in some unhappiness; however, the overall consequences must be balanced toward the good.

Regardless of how utility is defined, an action according to utilitarianism is right that produces the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people. Therefore, no action is right or wrong in and of itself. Actions can only be judged in light of their consequences. General moral rules may be useful in analysis, but any such rule can be disregarded in the interest of promoting utility. In addition, motive or intention carries no moral weight. For example, I may feel it is my duty to tell a patient the truth but, if the patient is harmed in some significant way by the information I provide, then I have violated the principle of utility and acted wrongly.

There are two main applications of utilitarian thought. **Act utilitarianism** focuses on the consequences of particular actions in particular circumstances. That is, an act is right to the extent that it produces the highest utility in that individual circumstance. This allows you to consider every situation as completely unique. On the other hand, it also allows for inconsistency in action and requires that you basically start every analysis from scratch.

Rule utilitarianism takes a somewhat different view by suggesting that the principle of utility can be used to develop and test rules that can be applied in

similar situations. The basic premise is that if we always follow a set of rules that generally produce the best consequences, our actions will result in the greatest social utility or the best outcome for everyone in the long run. In this view, an act is right if it follows a rule that has been shown to maximize utility in other similar situations. An obvious drawback to this approach is the sheer number of rules and exceptions likely to be generated, as well as the possibility that the rules would conflict in some circumstances.

For more on utilitarianism see:

Ethics Updates. Utilitarianism. <http://ethics.sandiego.edu/theories/Utilitarianism/>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Jeremy Bentham.
<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/b/bentham.htm>

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. John Stuart Mill.
<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/m/milljs.htm>

The Literary Encyclopedia. Utilitarianism.
<http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=1169>

Mill, J. S. Utilitarianism. <http://www.utilitarianism.com/mill1.htm>

Philosophy Pages. John Stuart Mill.
<http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/mill.htm>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Consequentialism.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/>