

Candidate 7 evidence

3. Utilitarianism (Against Intuition)

Jeremy Bentham was an 18th century philosopher, born to rich conservative parents in England and raised in great wealth. However, this did not stop him from becoming a deeply empathetic and caring man. Bentham was a huge advocate against slavery, the death penalty, misogyny, and animal abuse, making him quite progressive for his time. In addition to being a philosopher, Bentham was also a politician, serving in parliament for large portion of his life. During this time, the British government was ran with what is known as a "laissez faire" approach, meaning they would create laws that did not involve directly intervening with people's lives and instead be broad and vague, often not actually assisting in making the world fairer or happier for the people involved. Bentham had issues with this, upset with the lack of actual impact these laws made he was motivated to create a moral theory that could be used to ensure that the laws would actually assist the people, and that the people themselves could use the system to make the most moral decision. And thus: The new Classical Utilitarianism was born.

Classical Utilitarianism (also known as Act Utilitarianism) was not the first of its kind, being based on philosophical ideas ranging back to ancient times. It was a consequentialist theory, being that it would focus on the consequences that come from an action instead of the intent behind them, as it is the consequences that actually affect the world. This came from the desire to implement the system into law, as it is the consequences of laws that are relevant to our real lives, not the intent behind whoever made them. Classical Utilitarianism is founded on one singular belief, the hedonic principle, being that we as human beings value achieving happiness above all else, and actively seek avoid suffering. This is also known as the sovereignty of pain and pleasure, meaning that we see pain and pleasure as opposite feelings, and desire to gain pleasure the most and to avoid pain the most. The purpose of Utilitarianism is to ensure that the best action to be made is the one that will result in the greatest amount of happiness, for the greatest amount of people, for the greatest amount of time. This is very useful in striving towards our goals of pleasure and happiness, and is generally praised for being compassionate and caring towards all, treating the happiness of everyone equally no matter what. However, this theory is not exempt to criticism, and one of the main critiques is that Utilitarianism cannot function because it sometimes requires people to act against their intuition. In this essay i will discuss the validity of this criticism and how Utilitarianism as a whole was developed over time to be less susceptible to the claim.

There are four most important parts of Utilitarianism that come together to form the basis of the theory. The first of these is the Greatest Happiness Principle (Generally abbreviated to the GHP), which states that the goal of Utilitarianism is to choose the outcome that results in the greatest amount of happiness, for the greatest amount of people, for the greatest amount of time. The second factor is the Hedonic Principle, which argues that above all else human beings desire to achieve happiness and to avoid suffering. The third being the Principle of Utility, stating that for an action (or law) to be valid and moral, it must actually be of relevant use in terms of achieving the happiness we so desire. And the fourth and final is the Equity principle that states the happiness and pain of every person matters equally, no matter the circumstances.

The first problem when it comes to the claim that Utilitarianism is against our nature or intuition is that all of these foundations rely on the assumption that every person desires to achieve happiness as our ultimate goal in life, a sweeping generalisation and simply not true. I personally do not hold happiness above all else, my goal in life has always been to reach a place of contentment, where I can be calm and at peace with my own being, simply content to be existing in my own skin. This is the state that I work towards, I agree that happiness is a contributing factor to achieving this serenity but it not the sole reason, and by focusing on only happiness I would likely never reach it, to be content is to be at peace with all of your emotions, not just to experience as much happiness as you can. The point is that Bentham is assuming that the entire world shares his belief, and that everyone holds happiness to the same standard that he does. It can also be argued that suffering is not something that should be avoided at all times, as without suffering through difficult times we would not have the change to grow and bloom as a person, triumphing over challenges and coming out on the other side more aware of ourselves and confident in our skills. This is the first piece of evidence that Utilitarianism requires people to act against our intuition and our own will.

Utilitarianism is distinct in that it uses a mathematical formula to calculate which course of action would result in the greatest happiness, known as the hedonic calculus. This calculus does not have steps, but instead a selection of items which are to be rated on a scale of 0-10 based on if they are more pleasure inclined or pain inclined. Some examples would be Duration: How long the pain/pleasure would last. It would get a high score for long lasting pleasure and short lived pain, and get a low score for lasting pains and short pleasures. Another example would be Intensity: How strongly the pain and pleasure is felt, with intense pleasures and mild pains giving it a high rating, whereas intense suffering and low happiness would give it a low rating. Other items include things such as Fecundity, Purity, Closeness/remoteness, and others of that nature. There are 7 items in total, all in service of creating a final score out of 70 points. Each decision would be ran through these 7 items and the one with the highest score (Highest GHP) would be the one chosen to fulfil the Greatest Happiness Principle. This seems good in idea, as it allows for the more moral decision to be made that would make the most people feel pleased. However, this also leads to us having to make decisions that sacrifice our own happiness for the sake of others, and often going against our intuition simply because more people would be happy.

A prime example of this would be this hypothetical: Imagine you are at your best friend's wedding, it is about an hour before the ceremony and you catch their spouse in the act cheating on your best friend. Minutes before the ceremony, your friend asks you if their partner is cheating. You would naturally be inclined to tell your friend about this immediately as they would be going into a false marriage and you have a duty to them as their trusted friend not to lie to them and watch it all go ahead. A vast majority of people would agree that it would be wrong of you to withhold the information from your best friend, after all why would you want them to suffer so strongly in the future? however, it is likely that the hedonic calculus would tell us to actually keep the information and tell nobody. By telling your best friend, they would be absolutely miserable and be that way for a long time, both the cheating spouse and their new partner would be upset that they got caught, all the wedding guests would be upset that the wedding was called off and they had to go home, your best friend would be upset that their special day was ruined. There is a lot of quantifiable suffering in the situation where you don't tell your friend, but it would feel so wrong to lie to them and watch the wedding go ahead, forcing them into even worse suffering later. But because their suffering would be individual, and only slightly greater than it would be now, along with almost no pain from the people who were at their wedding, it would seem that utilitarians would go for this option, against our personal instincts.

Later down the line, another man would take up the prospect of Utilitarianism and augment

it in ways that would work to rectify this problem, his name being John Stuart Mill. JS Mill created what is known as "Rule Utilitarianism", being identical in function but having additional aspects that allow it to be more in line with our intuitions. Rule Utilitarianism states that while enacting all of the parts of Classical Utilitarianism, we should also make an effort to follow the general rules of society. These rules are both social norms and actual laws, most commonly being listed as "Do not lie, do not steal, do not kill" With these rules in mind, Mill's Utilitarianism would allow us to act on our intuition and tell our best friend that their spouse is cheating on them, then being more in line with our intuition as a whole. The best part of Rule Utilitarianism is that it is intended to be approached with a "soft" mindset, meaning that the rules are not set in stone to be followed at all times, but only when they seem reasonable, and breaking them is okay when it results in great happiness or change. An example Mill gave for this is that in the case of an oppressive government mistreating it's people, it would be fair and morally right for the people to rise up and kill the oppressors, provided it would lead to a society where more people are allowed to be happy, and most importantly live to begin with. Under both classic and the soft approach of rule it is explicitly okay to sacrifice the life of one in regards to the many, provided the one is leading to suffering and death through their actions.

Although this is a great positive change in the right direction with Rule, it still fails to address one of the most important lapses in the original system. It can be argued that people at their core, are spontaneous and more importantly, selfish beings. This is not to say people are bad or evil, as selfishness itself is not necessarily bad. Selfishness is an important part of our lives and something that should not be wiped from us all together, it is crucial to allow selfishness to be a part of ourselves in order to guarantee self preservation. It is true that we have a duty to others, and it is true that we should be as compassionate as we can in all parts of our lives, and it is true that we should treat others with the upmost respect and care as often was we can, but we are a person too. It is so important to allow yourself to receive the care and support you lend to others, as if we disregard our own beings in favour of everyone else we will end up miserable and reliant on pleasing others. Utilitarianism expects the user to be the incredibly selfless, always sacrificing self love in favour of giving to others. If you take it to its extremes, all your actions under Utilitarianism should involve giving to charity, as your money would result in more pleasure on the receivers who desperately need it than your money would give to you. But if you want to live a happy and fulfilled life it is important to prioritise yourself sometimes and let yourself enjoy the rewards of what you've earned, and choose to pamper yourself because you deserve it. Selfishness gets a bad reputation, and rightfully so in large amounts, but we cannot completely disregard it if we wish to thrive in our own lives.

Overall, the criticism that Utilitarianism can't work as a moral theory because it sometimes requires people to act against their intuition is something i agree with and i believe is a well evidenced claim that can be proved to be true. Utilitarianism is a noble cause, to spread happiness and love to all who need it and allow for everyone to be treated equally and kindly, something that i believe we should all strive towards. But, although at a surface level it seems like the ideal moral code it forces us to sacrifice parts of ourselves that are crucial, such as selfishness and prioritising the happiness of those closest to us. To be given the choice between saving someone you truly love, and saving five strangers utilitarianism would expect us to help the five no matter what, regardless of the impact on you. I'm sure some would agree with this, but i personally would choose the selfish option to save the person important to me in a heartbeat, as the strangers have no real relevance in my life and the burden of their pain would be mine to bear, something i would be okay with having if it saved the life of my loved on. Utilitarianism relies on a selection of sweeping generalisations and assuming that all people strive for the same thing: happiness, which, is not always true across every person including myself. The most crucial point that Utilitarianism misses is that we - the user- are an individual, and no matter how many

systems you put in place, or how many laws or calculuses you use, you can never wipe out individuality in search of one be all end all system to use for all issues, as every human always has been always will be different.