**Utilitarianism (Part 1): Introduction, Bentham and Mill**

**Information:** An introduction to the key ideas and themes of Utilitarianism as set out in the moral philosophy of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. A version of this article was originally published on the website www.faithnet.org.uk.

**Introduction**

The principle of utility - or Utilitarianism - is a moral test for the rightness of actions, based on how much *pleasure or  pain* they produce. The most well-known (and developed) versions of it are found in the work of *Jeremy Bentham* (1748-1832) and *John Stuart Mill* (1806-1873). However, the 'principle of utility' is also found in the work of *David Hume* (1711-1776), and can trace its origins back to *Epicurus* (341-270 BCE).

Utilitarianism is a *Consequentialist* theory of ethics. Consequentialist theories judge the rightness (or wrongness) of an action, by what occurs as a result of doing something.



Bentham and Mill wanted to find a secure, irrefutable and objective basis for morality. They were deeply suspicious of moral theories which did not do this, especially when it seemed they were arbitrary and subjective (as they felt faith-based moralities were). Being anti-establishment, anti-monarchist, anti-imperialist meant they also wanted a more *democratic* approach to ethics and law-making. Therefore, judging actions to be right or wrong on the basis of their effects, seemed to allow Bentham and Mill (and other Utilitarians) to *objectify* morality. In other words, they could actually see that doing *x* would lead to *y* outcome, rather than be told that this or that *might* or could happen.

Utilitarianism is often contrasted with *Deontological* ethics. These consider an act to be good when someone is doing what they *ought* to do (one's*duty*), and bad when not doing this. Deontologists are only interested in the act, and not whether doing something leads to good or bad consequences.

**Something to think about:** We are often told that *lying* is wrong, but why do people think it is? If someone told you that lying was no longer wrong, would you agree or disagree with them, and why?

**Key terms**

* **Hedonistic Utilitarianism:** An action is good when it *maximises* the amount of*pleasure*, leading to the minimum amount of pain.
* **Act Utilitarianism:** Thinking about how our *specific actions* might contribute to the welfare of others, or be detrimental to it.
* **Rule Utilitarianism:**Only implementing *rules* (or *laws*), which will lead to the well-being of the majority of people.
* **Preference Utilitarianism:** Thinking about how others would prefer us to act (i.e. they would not want to suffer because of something we do), even if they knew nothing about our actions, or experienced no ill-effects as a result of them.

In his 1952 book [*Open Society and Its Enemies (Volume 1)*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0415237319?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0415237319), British philosopher Sir Karl Popper suggested that instead of seeking to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people, we should instead be looking to *avoid harming* the greatest number of people. This is known as**Negative Utilitarianism**.

**Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)**



In, [*Fragment of Government*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0521359295?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0521359295) (1776) and [*An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0486454525?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0486454525) (1789), Bentham set about attacking English law as that which had no logical or scientific foundation. In other words, there was no objective basis for English law, and as such morality rested on a multiplicity of foundations (e.g. the Bible, tradition, conscience etc.). This meant that the law/morality, was nothing more than a set of subjective truth-claims, with no objective basis. To correct this, Bentham wanted to introduce a means (or criteria) for validating and securing ethical behaviour, and one which could also serve as the basis for a system of law and government. He also wanted a more democratic form of government, as he felt that handing power to rule over to others led to an attitude of servitude and dependency amongst the common people, and was open to abuse by those in power (who could use their position to promote their own ideals).

Nature has placed mankind under two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. [(Bentham J., *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*)](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0486454525?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0486454525)

Bentham began [*An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0486454525?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0486454525)by defining human nature as something fundamentally driven by the pleasure/pain principle. He believed that from observing the way people operate in the world, it could be reasonably demonstrated that humans naturally seek pleasure, and naturally seek to avoid pain. Therefore, he believed that morality (and the laws derived from this), could be grounded in what he believed to be a fundamental and 'objective' truth of our existence - maximising pleasure, and minimising pain!

According to Bentham, a good politician or judge would be one who introduced laws based on what would be to the advantage of most people. In other words, they act for the greater good of the greatest number of people.

**Something to think about and discuss:** Do you believe politicians or rulers in your country, are acting for the greater good of the greatest number of people? Find one example of a story from the recent news to support your case.

**The****Hedonic Calculus (aka Felicific calculus)**

In order to avoid a subjective definition of what counts as pain and pleasure, Bentham devised a way of *calculating* pain and pleasure 'units'. These would be measured according to seven criteria:

* 1. The **intensity** of any pleasure or pain.
* 2. The **duration** of any pleasure or pain.
* 3. The **certainty or uncertainty** of any pleasure or pain.
* 4. The **remoteness** of any pleasure or pain (or how much the legislator might be affected).
* 5. The chances of the **same effects being repeated** (More pleasure or more pain?).
* 6. The chances of the **same effects not being repeated** (No more pleasure or pain?).
* 7. The **number of people** who will be affected by any pleasure or pain arising as a result of the act in question.

Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may either say that it is one that ought to be done... One may also say, that it is right it should be done; at least that it is not wrong it should be done: that it is a right action; at least that it is not a wrong action. [(Bentham J., *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*)](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0486454525?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0486454525)

**Something to discuss:** If the rightness of an action is evaluated according to the amount of pleasure it produces, is it morally just to torture one person to find the whereabouts of another person being held captive, if it will save their life? What about if torturing one person will save 10 lives, or 50 lives, or even 100 lives? What if these 100 lives were those of young children?

**John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)**



John Stuart Mil's father (James Mill) had worked for Jeremy Bentham, and was greatly impressed with Bentham's Utilitarianism. Naturally, he educated his son about the principle of utility. However, rather than accepting these ideas *carte blanch*, John Stuart Mill criticised Bentham for not really distinguishing between the *quality and quantity of pleasures*, and also for not recognising that there are some things which are more desirable than others. In his book [*Utilitarianism*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140432728?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0140432728)(1863), Mill distinguished between *physical* pleasures (eating, drinking, and having intimate relationships with others etc.), and *intellectual* pleasures (philosophical debate, reading, listening to an opera etc.). Being a highly educated man (and a little sexually repressed), Mill naturally favoured the 'higher' pleasures over the lower ones.

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. [(Mill J. S., *Utilitarianism*)](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140432728?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0140432728)

Mill was critical of those who believed the principle of utility was nothing more than a justification for gratifying one's physical appetites. In fact, given the choice Mill believed people would always seek the 'higher' pleasures over the 'lower' ones. In fact, he considered this to be the *natural* thing for humans to do:

A beast's pleasures do not satisfy a human being's conception of happiness. [(Mill J. S., *Utilitarianism*)](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140432728?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0140432728)

**Mill responds to his objectors**

In chapter 2 of [*Utilitarianism*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140432728?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0140432728), Mill spends some time answering various objections he felt could be raised against his version of the principle of utility. One of the biggest objections he felt needed to be countered, was that the principle of utility is based on an ideal which is unattainable; that people cannot be happy *all* *the time*. Mill's response was to suggest that if we have in mind a life of complete and total unending happiness, then of course this is unobtainable, No one can be that happy all the time, and nor should they be! However, we can aspire to live a life which is generally more happy than not, and as such this should be our goal:

It is only those in whom the need for excitement is a disease, that feels the tranquility that follows the excitement dull and insipid, instead of pleasurable in direct proportion to the excitement that preceded it. [(Mill J. S.,*Utilitarianism*)](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140432728?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0140432728)

Mill also felt that some people might ask why they should be concerned about other people's happiness, especially if this involved some loss of pleasure on their own part. Mill's response to this objection was to show that in order for someone to 'happy', there must be some trade-off between people. We cannot think it feasible to live a purely selfish existence and expect to give nothing back to others around us, for we will soon become very unhappy at how other people begin to treat us in due course. We can also find happiness in helping other people.

Probably one of the biggest objections Mill considers, is the charge that there is often no time to calculate and weigh-up the different effects our actions might have. Sometimes we are called to make decisions 'in the heat of the moment', and as such do not have the luxury of deliberating the various outcomes of our actions before doing something. Mill's first response to this is to first show that this objection is absurd, for we do not have to know *every* possible outcome of doing something, before doing anything. Also, it is not the case that we have no clue as to what might generally occur as a result of doing something. To say we do not know how our actions will affect *everyone* is one thing, but to we do not know how our actions will affect *anyone*, is simply not true:

Mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness. [(Mill J. S., *Utilitarianism*)](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140432728?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0140432728)

Mill considers the principle of utility to be as close to an objective moral truth as we can get. Although he accepts that being governed by feelings of pleasure/pain is rather subjective, he challenges us to show how it is not a principle which governs all human behaviour. People do all kinds of things because they believe it will make them 'happy', even if they do them out of a sense of 'duty'. Our basic instinct is to avoid pain, and in doing so we naturally seek pleasure.

[Utilitarianism (Part 2): Singer, developments and critiques](http://www.thatreligiousstudieswebsite.com/Ethics/Moral_Theory/Utilitarianism/utilitarianism2_intro.php)

## Utilitarianism (Part 2): Singer, developments and critiques

**Information:** A look at Peter Singer's Preference Utilitarianism, as well as some of the developments and critiques of the principle of utility. A version of this article was originally published on the website www.faithnet.org.uk.

**Peter Singer (b. 1946)**



Peter Singer works in the field of practical ethics. He also writes from the perspective of *Preference Utilitarianism*, and has published two popular book exploring moral issues from this point-of-view. In [*Animal Liberation*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0060011572?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0060011572)(1975), Singer argued that animals have the same rights as humans, based on their capacity to experience pain, and that any species which has the capacity to suffer should be given equal rights because of this. Discriminating against a species simply because they have fur or feathers, is nothing more than Species-ism. In [*Practical Ethics*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/052143971X?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=052143971X) (1979), Singer continued to explore the suffering/rights issue, in particular by considering how this relates to matters such as abortion and euthanasia.

Singer's book [*Animal Liberation*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0060011572?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0060011572) was said to have been a major influence in the formation of the modern animal liberation movement.

One of the issues Preference Utilitarians such as Singer are trying to draw attention to, is the question of whether one needs to directly experience something, in order for it to be morally significant. For instance, Bentham's [hedonic calculus](http://www.thatreligiousstudieswebsite.com/Ethics/Moral_Theory/Utilitarianism/utilitarianism_intro.php#Hedonic_Calculus) is said to be a measure of 'pleasure/pain' units, but this is largely done from the point-of-view of one making the decision how to act. Only the seventh criteria seems to consider how the matter might be viewed from another perspective:

7. The **number of people** who will be affected by any pleasure or pain arising as a result of the act in question. [(Bentham J., *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*)](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0486454525?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0486454525)

This might imply that according to Bentham, whatever you do not experience yourself, does not matter.

**A bigger picture!**



What Singer (and other Preference Utilitarians) are trying to do, is expand the horizon of who (or what) should feature in moral debates. For instance, if we say that testing a nuclear weapon is morally acceptable because it discourages wars, and that no humans are harmed in the process of doing so; have we also taken into account the impact this will have on the environment, and on non-human species living in the region of the test area? Singer's point about the capacity for animals to suffer, invites us to think about the consequences of nuclear tests from the non-human perspective. For instance, what will happen to animals living near the test site, or even the environment? If we were literally 'in their shoes' (i.e. we were these animals, or the Earth), would we want someone to detonate a nuclear weapon on, or near to us? If our answer is no, and we would *prefer* this not to happen, then detonating a nuclear weapon is morally wrong, according to Preference Utilitarians.

As we realise that more and more things have global impact, I think we're going to get people increasingly wanting to get away from a purely national interest. [(Peter Singer, *www.brainyquote.com*)](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/p/peter_singer.html)

I think there are ways in which we have become a single global community that were not true a hundred years ago; the ability to know what's happening everywhere instantly by having CNN beaming it into our living rooms; that connection with remote parts of the world that we never had.[(Peter Singer, *www.brainyquote.com*)](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/p/peter_singer.html)

**Something to think about:** What do you think about Preference Utilitarianism? Do you think it is possible for people to consider such a diverse range of interests? Does it matter if we act in ways people will never know about, even though it could potentially hurt them (but never actually did)?

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**Intuitionism**

In his book [*Principia Ethica*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0521448484?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0521448484) (1903), British philosopher G. E. Moore argued that 'Good' was indefinable, and instead proposed that we intuitively know what it is:

If I am asked "What is good?", my answer is that good is good and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked "How is good to be defined?" my answer is that it cannot be defined and that is all I have to say about it.[*(Moore, G. E., Principia Ethica)*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0521448484?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0521448484)

Moore's discussion follows on naturally from the principle of utility. If the basis of what is good is defined as what is pleasurable (or what makes people happy), then we are essentially dealing with an indefinable notion. Although the things people believe will make them happy are many and varied, underlying all of them is an intuition (or *feeling*) that they are good, because they make people happy. Although people may dispute the specifics, Moore says they cannot dispute the fact that they *know* what will make them happy.

The idea that pleasure/happiness is the 'end' of everything, is also found in the moral theory of Aristotle. In [*The Nicomachean Ethics*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140449493?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0140449493), he argued that that all 'good' acts performed by someone, would lead to their greater well-being (*eudaimonia*).

Moore was highly critical of Utilitarianism, accusing the theory of (wrongly) using non-moral propositions to justify moral ones; something he referred to as the *Naturalistic Fallacy*). For example, although Utilitarians argue that what is good is what maximises pleasureable outcomes, Moore believed this led to the worrying suggestion that what is pleasurable is always to be considered good. Of course most people would object to this idea, but Moore's point is that we cannot do this if we ground moral judgments on the notion that pleasurable outcomes are good. For if we object to the idea that what is pleasurable is always to be considered good, then this is being inconsistent and is an arbitrary judgment. For on the one hand we are saying that the 'Good' is what maximises 'pleasure', but on the other that not everything which maximises pleasure is 'Good'!

In light of this, Moore considered it far better to say that we simply do not know what 'good' is, rather than trying to justify it using 'pleasure' or 'happiness' (or any other related notion).

**Some issues**

Although Mill addressed some of the problems with the principle of utility in chapter 2 of[*Utilitarianism*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140432728?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0140432728), this did not make it a bullet-proof moral theory. In fact, Mill's version in particular comes in for special criticism, in that he wants to distinguish between different sorts of pleasures (higher/lower). Although he was surely right to expand on Bentham's simplistic treatment of 'pleasure', how exactly are we to distinguish between these higher and lower pleasures, and why should 'intellectual pleasures' be deemed better than sensual ones? Furthermore, is making this distinction grounded in an objective 'truth', or simply Mill's personal opinion on the matter? Also, as Utilitarian theories are concerned more with the consequences of actions rather than motives, it is reasonable (especially in the case of Act Utilitarianism) that laws should be broken if this leads to the greatest happiness for the greatest number? Yet if so, who decides if a law should be broken for the interests of the majority, or not?

On the other hand, we cannot always say that what is in the best interests of the majority (or what the majority desires), is morally right either. For instance, in the 1930s Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party were elected into power by the majority of German people, but few would say this was a good decision in light of the consequences. Yet as far as Bentham and Mill are concerned, anyone opposing Hitler in the early stages of his eventual dictatorship would have been acting contrary to the theory of utility, especially as Hitler offered the German people great hope to end their suffering from years of economic depression.

In her introduction to selected writings on [*Utilitarianism*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140432728?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0140432728), Mary Warnock argued that Mill was not about creating a moral theory as such, but simply concerned with *describing* the behaviour of most people; this being that they appear to be driven by a desire to maximise pleasurable outcomes, and thus decrease painful ones, because they believe this is a *good*thing to do. Warnock does not believe Mill intended to say that pleasure *was* (or equal to) good (which is the assumption of Moore's critique)! In fact, Mill appears reluctant to offer any fixed definition of what counts as 'good', in much the same way Moore did:

No reason can be given why the general happiness is desirable, except that each person, so far as he believes it to be attainable, desires his own happiness. [(Mill J. S., *Utilitarianism*)](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140432728?ie=UTF8&tag=curdeushomowhygo&linkCode=as2&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0140432728)

Warnock also believed that Mill intended to say that it is not specific actions, but *types* of behaviour which produce 'measurable' outcomes. If we look for the specific pleasure/pain value in each particular case, then of course our pursuit of a final 'value' will never be found, due to infinite 'exceptions to the rule'. On the other hand, if we say that in general *x* behaviour leads to *y* outcome, then we appear to have some basis for evaluating whether what we are doing is right, or not.

**Something to discuss:** On the 1st December 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama for white passengers. Her actions led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and was the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement in the US. Now imagine this is the 2nd December 1955. Using the principle of utility, explain whether you believe Rosa Park was right to do what she did, or not.

Finally, feminists argue that the desire to organise, order, and control things in order to gain moral superiority (or power) over them, is a male trait and one that ignores the diverse nature of moral interests. They would say that by establishing a *generic* moral framework within which to explore moral questions, Utilitarianisms are essentially missing an opportunity to discover a more inclusive solution to moral issues, and may even be (consciously or unconsciously) oppressing women at the same time.