

Commitments of Utilitarianism

by John Lumsden



WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will focus on the types of evaluations of actions that a utilitarian will give. You will also have a go at using this ethical theory by evaluating a situation yourself. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Review of Utilitarianism

To begin with, recall that utilitarianism is the name given to any ethical theory that says something is good if, overall, it brings about utility. If an action brings about utility, then we say that happiness or well-being is the consequence of that action.

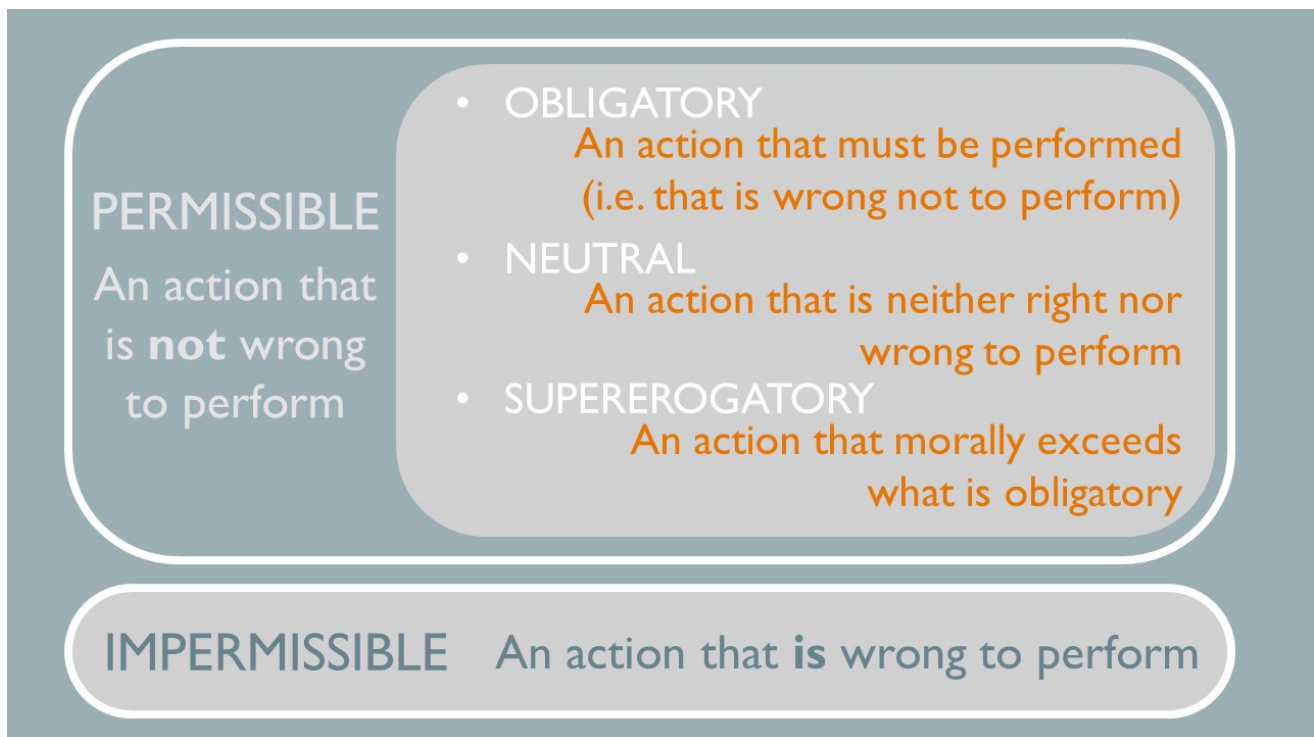


HINT

When a utilitarian talks about happiness they aren't simply talking about the good mood you get when you're doing something you enjoy. Happiness is understood in a very broad sense to include anything from the comfort of a good chair to the relief of knowing your family is safe.

You also need to remember that a utilitarian isn't just concerned to add up all the good consequences when evaluating an action. They have a bigger picture in mind. They also calculate all the bad consequences as well. This is so they can get a complete account of the utility that an action has by weighing up the good and bad to see what the overall outcome is.

In the next section we will look at the various ways a utilitarian can evaluate actions. But before doing so, let's remind ourselves of the terms that ethical theorists use to evaluate actions.



Make sure you're thinking about these evaluative terms when we go on to see utilitarianism in action in the next section.



BIG IDEA

In this section we reminded ourselves about utilitarianism. Here are the definitions again. Utilitarianism is a system of ethics that maintains that good is proportionate to total probable utility. Utility is the increase or decrease in the total happiness consequent to an action.

2. Permissibility and Impermissibility in Utilitarianism

For a utilitarian, something is permissible if it doesn't bring about an overall reduction in utility. Be careful here, though. This doesn't mean that an action isn't allowed to bring about *any* reduction in utility. It only means that there can't be an *overall* reduction in utility.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine you were just elected the leader of a country and you're a utilitarian. You would need to think about the overall outcome of your actions. Suppose you decide to take the land and buildings of some millionaires to reuse for services for the poor.

CALCULATING OVERALL UTILITY



Although there is a small loss of utility, this is more than made up for by the greater gain in overall utility.

An act is only impermissible if there is an overall reduction in utility. For example, reconsider the above situation, but this time imagine that you took the land and buildings for your own personal gain. Since you are only one person, and the millionaires are more than one person, there is an overall reduction in utility. Thus the utilitarian will say it's wrong to do this.

3. Types of Permissibility in Utilitarianism

Now we will look at how a utilitarian would evaluate actions as either neutral, obligatory, or supererogatory. First of all, let's take the example of lying to find out what is obligatory for the utilitarian.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine your friend asks to hide in your house because there's a crazy killer after them. If the killer knocks on your door and asks if you've seen them, then you should lie and say no.

That's because lying will bring about greater utility in this situation (a saved life is of greater utility than being honest to someone). This action is obligatory for the utilitarian since you must do something if it will bring about an increase in utility.

By contrast, lying would be neutral for the utilitarian if it didn't either bring about an increase in utility nor a decrease in utility.

➔ **EXAMPLE** If someone starts telling you a story they really like to tell, but you've heard it before, you could not tell them you've not heard it before and let them carry on. You would have lied to them, but it probably neither brings about an increase or decrease in utility. That's because your mild

discomfort in hearing the story again is likely balanced out by their pleasure in telling the story. Of course, it could be the case that your discomfort is greater than their pleasure. In which case, it would be impermissible since there would be an overall reduction in utility. Weighing up pleasure and displeasure is something the utilitarian must grapple with to make a decision here.

For a utilitarian, a supererogatory action is one that not only increases utility, but one that produces the most utility possible. In other words, you would need to maximize utility.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you volunteer once a week at a kitchen for the homeless, this increases utility. But if you sacrificed all your spare time to do this kind of volunteer work, then you would be producing the most utility you could. Therefore, this would be a supererogatory action.

4. Application of Utilitarianism

Now that you have seen how ethical evaluations can be based on consequences of actions, you can think about using this in a specific situation. Consider the example below and think about how you would evaluate each action if you were a utilitarian.



TRY IT

Imagine you're Superman. You use your superhuman gifts to help those in need. But one day massive damage is done to your city because of your careless battling with an enemy. You feel guilty for your negligence and quit your day job and all socializing in order to dedicate all your time to helping people.

The actions would have been evaluated in the following way:

1. The act of using your superhuman gifts to help others is obligatory since it increases overall utility.
2. The consequence of your battle produces a significant decrease in utility (e.g. civilian casualties) and thus your way of going about fighting your enemy is impermissible.
3. The act of sacrificing all your time for helping others is supererogatory because it maximizes utility.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of utilitarianism** and the terms for evaluating actions. Then we saw some examples of **permissibility and impermissibility in utilitarianism**, before looking in more detail at **the types of permissibility in utilitarianism**, including examples of obligatory, neutral, and supererogatory actions. Finally, an **application of utilitarianism** in a specific situation was considered, and the evaluation of the various actions given.