

Utilitarianism

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will begin looking at a specific ethical theory that bases right and wrong on the outcomes of actions. We will look at some of the features of this ethical theory, specifically how it approaches consequences. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Introducing Utilitarianism](#)
2. [Predicting Consequences](#)
3. [Degrees of Utility](#)
4. [The Scope of Utility](#)

1. Introducing Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the name given to any ethical theory that says something is good if, overall, it brings about **utility**. This idea, that the goodness of something depends on how much utility it brings about, is often called the utility principle.

There is a danger of thinking about utility in too narrow a sense. For instance, I can't help but hear utility along the lines of "utility belt" or something like that, where utility means useful for a job. But here utility just refers to something that's beneficial to us, or aids our well-being. You could say that something has utility if it makes us happy; but happiness is understood in a broad way as well, to include anything from the comfort of a good chair to the relief of knowing your family is safe.

This way of thinking comes quite naturally to us most of the time. We often think that people should act in a way that brings about the better outcome. You can even see this in the laws or policies that are established.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Some governments have passed policies to limit sugar in food so that there will be less obesity. Cutting down the level of obesity in a population is seen as a good outcome, so the policy is seen as good.

Utilitarianism holds that everyone ought to increase utility. But this doesn't mean everyone should act the same. For instance, if I have lots of money, then I can increase utility by donating to charity. But if you don't, then you could increase utility by volunteering at a homeless shelter. We would have different actions, but we would be following the same ethical ideal. With this in mind, you can figure out what kind of ethical theory utilitarianism is.



TERMS TO KNOW

Utilitarianism

A system of ethics that maintains that good is proportionate to total probable utility.

Utility

The increase or decrease in the total happiness consequent to an action.

2. Predicting Consequences

For a Utilitarian, anything that affects consequences is ethically relevant. If you wanted to decide which action is best, you would thus need to figure out which action would have the best possible outcome. This can be difficult because our actions affect people in different ways.

→ EXAMPLE If you gave money to a homeless person, you can't be absolutely sure if this will bring about happiness or not. For instance, maybe they use that money to buy a meal (a good consequence) or maybe they waste it on a losing lottery ticket (not a good consequence).

People do not respond in the same way as things do. This is because, unlike mere things, humans make decisions rather than being merely pushed around by various causes. For this reason we can't predict the way humans will be affected by actions in the same way that we can predict the way things are affected by action. Nevertheless, our experience of people can help us predict fairly well some of the consequences of our actions.

→ EXAMPLE Although charities sometimes suffer from problems such as inefficiency, we know that giving to them will generally lead to good consequences, such as funding research into preventable diseases or raising awareness of a neglected problem.

This shows that there is at least a rough guide available for your actions, even if you cannot predict with absolute certainty what the consequences of your actions will be.

3. Degrees of Utility

So far we've said that utilitarianism determines the good as what brings about utility. But you need to keep in mind that it isn't simply about the presence or absence of utility. It is also about the degree or quantity of utility.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine you're deciding on where to go on holiday. If you decided to go someplace where you could also meet up with some old friends, this would bring about more happiness than if you didn't. Therefore, the utilitarian will say it's good.

But if you decided to travel to a place that recently suffered a natural disaster and you volunteer to help survivors, then this brings about even more utility. Therefore, for the utilitarian, this is a better action.

As you can see, there are different degrees of goodness for the utilitarian. The same goes for badness.

→ EXAMPLE Avoiding paying your taxes is bad because it reduces the utility experienced by your fellow nationals through the reduction of funding to public services. But if you were a lawyer helping many wealthy people avoid tax, this is worse. That's because the reduction of revenue is much more severe.

4. The Scope of Utility

The last example we considered also shows that utilitarianism is concerned with the happiness of everyone, not just the person acting. Not paying your taxes may make you happy, but it wouldn't achieve happiness overall. That's because many people benefit from the services provided by taxation. Another example is using your family's savings to buy yourself a yacht. You may be happy, but the rest of your family probably won't be.

DID YOU KNOW

Although utilitarians say that you must consider the broader effect of your actions, there is still no agreement about whether this should include the effect on animals as well.

As you may have guessed, a utilitarian is not just concerned with whether or not something has good consequences. They are also concerned about the potential bad consequences. And most actions have both good and bad consequences.

→ EXAMPLE Imagine you manage to stop some racists assaulting a minority and they turn their hostility towards you instead. The positive consequence would be that someone escaped violence, but the negative consequence would be that you didn't.

As we have seen, the utilitarian tries to get all the probable consequences in view when evaluating things. They can do so by considering:

1. How much utility is produced and to what degree
2. How many people are affected
3. How likely utility is to come about

We've already spoken about the first two. For instance, we saw that a utilitarian can say that one action brings about utility (visiting friends on holiday), while another brings about even more (volunteering to help people in need during your holiday).

We also saw that a utilitarian can calculate which action brings about more utility by contrasting what makes only you happy with what makes many people happy. The example about whether or not you pay taxes showed this.

A utilitarian can think about the probability of a consequence. For instance, you're more likely to get a decent job if you finish school. Therefore, the utilitarian will say you probably ought to go to school to get that probable utility. We could also predict other utilities further down the road, such as contributing to society more generally.

SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by **introducing utilitarianism**, focusing on clarifying what the utility principle is. Then we considered the difficulty of **predicting consequences** and saw how the utilitarian might handle this.

The final two sections looked at the ways that utilitarianism can think about utility, including the **degrees of utility** and the **scope of utility**. In the former we saw that consequences can bring about more or less happiness, and in the latter we saw that the amount of people affected is factored in utility, as well as the balance of good and bad consequences.

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