

Utilitarianism

In your view, is maximising happiness and minimising pain a suitable aim for a system of ethics? Do you think that there are other possible goals that are more important than pleasure – perhaps justice, or obedience to God, or doing right just because it is right? What do you think might be arguments for and against using happiness as a measure for morality?

Your work for the summer is based on 'Utilitarianism'. This is the idea that we should always act in a way that brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. Use the information on these sheets, plus this website: <https://laurenrevisesphilosophy.wordpress.com/2019/02/20/utilitarianism/> to answer this task.

The principle of utility

- Jeremy Bentham introduced the idea of utilitarianism. He wanted to find a way of doing ethics that did not rely on rules or the Church and that would help social reform.
- He thought that everyone desires pleasure and hopes to avoid pain.
- The principle of utility is otherwise known as the greatest happiness principle: it is a principle that says the best course of action to take is the one which maximises happiness for the greatest number of people, and minimises pain.

The hedonic calculus

- Bentham devised the hedonic calculus, or felicific calculus, as a way of measuring whether an action would bring about maximum pleasure and avoid pain.
- To calculate the pleasure or pain an action is likely to generate, there are several factors to consider:

1. **Intensity** – will it be intense pleasure, or just mild?

2. **Duration** – how long is the pleasure likely to last?

3. **Certainty or uncertainty** – will it definitely bring pleasure; how likely is it?

4. **Propinquity** – how far off (in the future) is the pleasure or pain?

5. **Fecundity** – is the pleasure likely to lead to other pleasures too?

6. **Purity** – will it bring pure pleasure or will there be some pain involved as well?

7. **Extent** – how far-reaching will the pleasure be; will it affect a lot of people?

- In his book *Utilitarianism* (1863), John Stuart Mill added to Bentham's ideas by making a distinction between 'higher pleasures' and 'base pleasures'.
- Mill says the quality of the pleasure should also be included – intellectual, aesthetic, social and spiritual pleasures.
- He said it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied – we should not be content with just seeking sensual pleasure, like other animals.
- He thought that art and culture should be considered more important than pleasures such as getting drunk or gluttony.
- He thought that it could be right for an individual to sacrifice his or her own pleasure for the sake of other people.



John Stuart Mill classified cultural pleasures as higher than base pleasures such as eating cake

Act and rule utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is not a single system but has several different perspectives within it, including act and rule utilitarianism. There are also other kinds.

Act utilitarianism

- In act utilitarianism, each action is considered on its own.
- It looks at the balance of pleasure and pain that is likely to be produced by that particular action in those particular circumstances.
- There is no duty to adopt a particular approach because a different situation might involve different people with different interests.
- It avoids setting up rules. An act might bring about maximal pleasure in one set of circumstances, but the same act might bring more pain in another.

Rule utilitarianism

- In rule utilitarianism, the focus is on the 'common good' rather than on each individual action.
- It looks to create the greatest happiness for the greatest number in the long run.
- It considers what is best for society and what would happen if everyone behaved this way, as well as looking at the individual circumstances.
- Rule utilitarians recognise general rules that exist for the benefit of everyone, such as promise-keeping and truth-telling.

Possible strengths of utilitarianism

- It is flexible and allows for changes in public opinion as well as differences in individual circumstance.
- It involves reason and sensible consideration of different options.
- It does not depend on an external authority such as religion, but allows people to make their own decisions according to what they feel is best.
- It is based on practicality and on the observation that everyone wants to be happy.
- It is based on outcomes which are relatively straightforward to see and measure.
- Every individual is considered regardless of social status.



Those in the minority will always lose out to the majority following the principles of utilitarianism

Possible weaknesses of utilitarianism

- The hedonic calculus can be time-consuming and difficult to work out, and moral decisions often have to be made quickly.
- Some people argue that happiness is not a sufficient goal for ethics. Goodness and happiness are not the same.
- We are not always good at guessing what will make us happy, and it is even harder to work out what will make other people happy.
- Some people argue that the morality of an action should not be judged by its outcome but by its motivation.
- Some people criticise utilitarianism because it does not make any reference to God.
- If the greatest happiness for the greatest number is always the principle, then those who are in the minority, who are made happy by different things, lose out.



Utilitarian ethics are often used when making decisions about the best use of public money

Key terms

Principle of utility/greatest happiness: the idea that the choice that brings about the greatest happiness for the greatest number is the right choice

Hedonic calculus: the system for calculating the amount of pain or pleasure generated by an action

Consequentialism: ethical theories that see morality as driven by the consequences, rather than actions or character of those concerned

Quantitative: focused on quantity (how many, how big, etc.)

Qualitative: focused on quality (what kind of thing)

Act utilitarian: weighs up what to do at each individual occasion

Rule utilitarian: weighs up what to do in principle in all occasions of a certain kind

Test yourself on key knowledge (AO1)

1. What is the 'principle of utility'?
2. Who introduced utilitarianism first, Bentham or Mill?
3. What is the name given to systems of ethics that look at the outcomes of actions before deciding whether they are morally right or wrong?
4. What did Bentham think was the main motivation for human action?
5. In the hedonic calculus, what does 'propinquity' mean?
6. In the hedonic calculus, what does 'fecundity' mean?
7. What did Bentham mean when he talked about the purity of a moral action?
8. Mill added a qualitative dimension to the hedonic calculus – what does this mean?
9. What was the name of Mill's book about utilitarianism?
10. What kind of utilitarian would judge each action in its own individual circumstances?
11. How far does utilitarianism rely on taking into account the will of God?
12. Is utilitarianism relativist or absolutist as a system of ethics?

If you are unsure about any of the questions, look back over the key points on pages 88–90. You can check your answers on page 218.

Develop your skills in critical argument and evaluation (AO2)

For high marks in AO2, you need to think about the ideas in this chapter and develop your own perspective, so that you can produce critically evaluative arguments rather than just describing and presenting the views of others. At AS level, 50% of your marks are awarded for your skills in critical evaluation, and at A level, 60%.

Use the following questions to help you formulate your own views.

- » Discuss them with friends, making sure you articulate your own view and listen to the views of others.
- » Try writing your answers to these questions, to familiarise yourself with expressing your ideas in an academic style.

- » Remember to give reasons for your views.
- » Think about counter-arguments – what might someone say who held a different view from your own, and why do you think they are wrong?

1. **In your view, is maximising happiness and minimising pain a suitable aim for a system of ethics? Do you think that there are other possible goals that are more important than pleasure – perhaps justice, or obedience to God, or doing right just because it is right? What do you think might be arguments for and against using happiness as a measure for morality?**

Here is an example of the kinds of ideas you might explore in formulating your analysis and evaluation:

You might want to argue that happiness is a suitable goal for ethics, on the grounds that everyone wants to be happy, everyone wants their family and friends to be happy and everyone wants to live in a happy society. It could be seen as a readily achievable goal, as everyone recognises happiness when they see it, whereas people disagree about the nature of other possible goals such as justice or obedience to the will of God. On the other hand you could argue that there is a difference between

goodness and happiness, and that some things which might make us happy are not necessarily good. You might think that Mill's qualification of Bentham's utilitarianism, where he considered 'higher and lower pleasures' was a useful contribution which helps to overcome this difficulty, or you might think that we need to look to some other moral goal instead. You could argue that looking at happiness as a moral goal ignores such things as developing virtues and learning to be self-controlled.

Now use your critical and evaluative skills to explore these questions on your own.

2. When deciding what to do using the greatest happiness principle, should you include only the people immediately involved in the situation, or should you also think about people who might be indirectly affected, or future generations, or other species? Give reasons for your answer.
3. How might a utilitarian go about deciding how to allocate limited funds donated to a charity, where there is more need than there is money? Do you think a utilitarian way of allocating the funds would be the right way, or is there a better way, and if so, what is it and why is it better?
4. Do you think that in general, people are good at judging what will make them happy and what will cause them pain? Are they good at it often enough for consequential happiness to be a reliable measure for judging what to do? Can you think of examples to support your point of view?
5. Do you think it is right to give everyone's wishes and interests equal consideration when making moral judgements? For example, should a criminal's future happiness be considered to be just as important as the happiness of a victim of the crime?

6. Is it always, sometimes, or never right to judge the morality of an action by its consequences, in your view? If someone meant to do something bad, but in the end the action surprisingly turned out well for everyone and caused happiness instead, does that make the action morally good? Can it be right to judge morality by outcomes in some circumstances but not others, and if so how might we know when teleological ethics are appropriate?
7. Some people argue that utilitarianism can be used to justify actions that are intrinsically immoral, such as putting pleasure-inducing drugs in public drinking water. Do you think there are any actions that are intrinsically immoral? If so, what is it that makes them immoral?



Critics of utilitarianism suggest that happiness does not always equal goodness

Practice Exam Questions

Try these practice questions. You could:

- » write plans for each of them, to practise your skills in structuring an essay
 - » use them for practice in writing introductions and/or conclusions
 - » write the whole essay, perhaps against the clock.
1. How useful is utilitarianism as a guide to moral decision-making?
 2. 'Utilitarianism fails because it is impossible to measure happiness and harm.' Discuss.