

# Utilitarianism

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## Utilitarianism

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Ethics, Moral Philosophy, Political Philosophy, Economics

**Proponents:** Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Henry Sidgwick

### 1. Core Principles and Definition

**Utilitarianism** is a foundational ethical theory rooted in consequentialism, asserting that the morally correct course of action in any situation is the one that maximizes overall good or "utility." At its heart, the theory demands that moral decisions be judged solely by their resulting outcome, placing no inherent value on the intention of the actor or adherence to traditional moral rules. The classic formulation defines **utility** as the maximization of happiness and well-being, coupled with the minimization of suffering, pain, and unhappiness among all sentient beings affected by the action. This core principle, often termed the Greatest Happiness Principle, dictates that an action is right to the extent that it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people.

The radical nature of utilitarianism, especially during its inception, lay in its rejection of metaphysical or theological justifications for morality. Instead, it proposed an entirely secular and scientific basis for ethics, relying on observable consequences and the calculation of pleasure and pain. This commitment to measuring outcomes makes utilitarianism exceptionally appealing in practical settings, particularly in law, economics, and public policy, where objective metrics are sought to evaluate the success or failure of interventions. The theory provides a powerful, universal standard for moral judgment: if an act, policy, or institution increases net happiness more than any available alternative, it is the moral duty to pursue it, regardless of how counter-intuitive or painful the process might appear to individual participants.

Central to understanding utilitarian ethics is recognizing its distinction from egoism. While the theory acknowledges that individuals are motivated by the desire for their own happiness, **utilitarianism** is fundamentally an altruistic system. It requires the moral agent to be a "disinterested and benevolent spectator," weighing their own utility equally with that of every other person involved. This impartiality is a cornerstone of the doctrine, forcing decision-makers to transcend self-interest and consider the collective well-being. Furthermore, the definition of happiness, though initially interpreted purely as sensual pleasure by early proponents like Jeremy Bentham, was later refined by John Stuart Mill to include intellectual, moral, and aesthetic pleasures, thereby introducing a qualitative dimension to the concept of utility.

### 2. Historical Antecedents and Founding Figures

While ethical systems focused on consequences existed in nascent forms previously, the formal founding of classical **utilitarianism** is attributed primarily to the English philosopher and legal

reformer, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). Bentham introduced the explicit definition of utility as "that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness," linking this principle directly to legislation. His work, particularly in *A Fragment on Government* and *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, sought to reform British law and societal institutions by replacing tradition and dogma with rational, measurable criteria based entirely on utility maximization.

Bentham's philosophy was strictly quantitative and monistic; he believed all pleasures and pains, whether stemming from reading poetry or eating an apple, varied only in their measurable characteristics. This perspective led him to famously state that "the quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry." He envisioned a society built on rational choice where public administrators could precisely calculate the moral rightness of any proposed law or action using his detailed metric, the **Hedonic Calculus**. Bentham's radical agenda applied utilitarian principles not only to individual ethics but also to penal reform, economic policy, and government structure, making him one of the most influential political philosophers of his time.

The second pillar of classical utilitarian thought is John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), who refined, defended, and significantly broadened the theory, primarily in his seminal work, *Utilitarianism* (1861). Mill attempted to address early criticisms that the theory was too reductive or appealed only to base pleasures ("a doctrine worthy only of swine"). He introduced the crucial distinction between higher and lower pleasures, arguing that intellectual and moral pleasures hold greater intrinsic worth than purely sensual ones. Mill famously stated, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied." This qualitative adjustment sought to elevate **utilitarianism** beyond a mere counting mechanism, linking utility not just to satisfaction but to human flourishing and dignity.

### 3. Key Distinctions: Act vs. Rule Utilitarianism

The internal coherence of utilitarianism has been heavily debated, leading to a crucial division within the theory: the split between **Act Utilitarianism** and **Rule Utilitarianism**. This distinction arises from how the Greatest Happiness Principle is applied--whether it should be applied to individual actions performed at a specific moment or to general moral rules that govern classes of actions over time.

**Act Utilitarianism** (AU) is the direct, classical interpretation exemplified by Bentham. It holds that in any specific situation, a person should perform the action that will create the greatest net utility when compared to all other available alternatives. This approach is highly flexible and context-dependent, allowing for traditional moral prohibitions (like prohibitions against lying or stealing) to be violated if, in that specific, unique instance, breaking the rule results in a clearly better outcome for the majority. Critics often point out that AU can justify actions that seem intuitively unjust, such

as punishing an innocent person if doing so prevents mass panic and maximizes overall security.

In contrast, **Rule Utilitarianism** (RU), often associated with Mill's broader framing, applies the utility principle to the establishment of general moral rules. RU asks: which set of rules, if generally adopted and followed, would lead to the greatest overall happiness in the long run? Under RU, an individual action is deemed right or wrong based on whether it adheres to a utility-maximizing rule. For example, while lying might produce a positive outcome in a specific instance (as an AU might allow), RU would argue that a general rule prohibiting lying maximizes social trust and overall utility in the long term, thereby making the specific act of lying immoral, even if momentarily beneficial. This modification attempts to harmonize utilitarian demands with deeply held intuitions about rights and justice, offering a more robust framework for social stability.

#### 4. The Hedonic Calculus

To move ethics from the realm of subjective intuition to objective calculation, Bentham devised a rigorous quantitative method known as the **Hedonic Calculus** (or Felicific Calculus). This calculus provides seven specific metrics by which the pain and pleasure resulting from a given action or policy can be measured, summed up across all affected individuals, and compared against alternatives. The formalization of this approach was pivotal in establishing **utilitarianism** as a systematic philosophical tool.

The seven parameters of the Hedonic Calculus are:

**Intensity:** How strong is the pleasure or pain?

**Duration:** How long does the pleasure or pain last?

**Certainty:** How probable is it that the pleasure or pain will occur?

**Propinquity (Remoteness):** How soon will the pleasure or pain occur?

**Fecundity:** What is the probability that the pleasure will lead to further pleasures, or the pain to further pains?

**Purity:** What is the probability that the pleasure will be followed by pain, or the pain by pleasure?

**Extent:** How many people are affected by the pleasure or pain?

By assigning numerical values to these factors and aggregating the results, Bentham proposed that rational moral agents could determine the precise net utility of every choice. Although the practical application of the calculus in complex, real-time moral dilemmas remains challenging, its conceptual importance lies in establishing the standard that moral worth is quantifiable and dependent on measurable results. It forces the agent to broaden their perspective beyond immediate self-interest and consider the long-term, widespread ramifications of their actions.

## 5. Applications in Policy and Economics

The influence of **utilitarianism** extends far beyond academic ethics, having deeply shaped modern political philosophy, law, and economics. Because the theory provides a mechanism for evaluating outcomes based on aggregate well-being, it forms the philosophical foundation for many public policy decisions that rely on cost-benefit analysis. Whenever a government evaluates a new regulation, infrastructure project, or healthcare expenditure by weighing the total societal benefits against the total societal costs, it is implicitly employing a utilitarian framework.

In economics, utilitarian principles underpin the concept of welfare economics, which seeks to evaluate economic states based on their effects on societal well-being. The goal of maximizing social welfare function--a mathematical representation of the utility levels of all members of society--is a direct derivation of the Greatest Happiness Principle. This approach justifies policies aimed at progressive taxation, social insurance, and public goods provision, arguing that these measures, even if mildly negative for a small, wealthy subset, significantly increase the overall utility of the larger, less fortunate population.

Furthermore, utilitarianism profoundly impacted the history of legal and penal reform. Bentham was instrumental in advocating for legal structures based on deterring crime and rehabilitating offenders, arguing that punishment should only be applied if it yields a net positive utility (i.e., if the pain inflicted on the criminal prevents greater pain in the community). This shift moved legal philosophy away from retribution and towards a focus on social protection and future utility maximization, influencing the development of modern criminal justice systems globally.

## 6. Major Philosophical Criticisms

Despite its rational appeal, **utilitarianism** faces several persistent and compelling philosophical criticisms, primarily targeting its core reliance on consequences and its commitment to aggregation.

The most severe criticism revolves around **Justice and Rights**. Critics argue that because utilitarianism is concerned only with the maximization of net utility, it can potentially justify actions that violate fundamental individual rights or standards of justice. The classic thought experiment involves the "scapegoat problem," where sacrificing one innocent person (e.g., framing them for a crime) prevents riots or panic that would harm thousands. A strict Act Utilitarian might be forced to endorse this injustice if the net calculation favors the suffering of the one over the suffering of the many. This suggests that the theory fails to recognize intrinsic moral constraints on action, such as the duty not to harm the innocent, independent of the outcome.

A second major challenge is the **Problem of Measurement and Prediction**. Critics question the practical feasibility of the Hedonic Calculus, arguing that utility (happiness, pleasure, well-being) is

subjective, non-transferable, and nearly impossible to quantify across different individuals, let alone across future generations. It is also inherently difficult to predict all potential consequences of an action, especially long-term, second and third-order effects. If morality depends on accurately predicting outcomes, and accurate prediction is impossible, then the theory fails to provide a usable guide for moral action.

Finally, **Utilitarianism** is often criticized for being overly demanding. Since the moral obligation is always to perform the action that produces the absolute maximum utility, any action that fails to reach this maximum--even if it is good--is technically wrong. This would imply that spending money on a luxury item or even taking time off for personal leisure is immoral if that time or money could have been donated to charity, resulting in greater collective utility. Critics argue that this standard eradicates the concept of "supererogatory" acts (actions that are praiseworthy but not required) and demands a level of constant sacrifice that is unrealistic for human beings.

## 7. Contemporary Forms and Adaptations

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, utilitarian thought has evolved to address its classical criticisms, leading to several modern variations. One significant adaptation is **Preference Utilitarianism**, championed by philosophers like Peter Singer. This framework moves away from classical hedonism (pleasure and pain) and defines utility in terms of satisfying the preferences or desires of affected individuals. The morally right action is the one that satisfies the greatest number of preferences. This approach attempts to overcome the difficulty of measuring subjective happiness by using observable human choices and desires as the metric for well-being.

Another contemporary branch is **Negative Utilitarianism** (NU). NU argues that the primary moral focus should be on minimizing suffering rather than maximizing happiness. Proponents of NU often argue that suffering is morally more urgent than happiness is good, and thus the ethical imperative is to prevent extreme pain and misery. This orientation has significant implications in fields like bioethics and environmental ethics, guiding decisions toward mitigating potential catastrophes and minimizing irreversible harms.

Furthermore, the modern movement known as Effective Altruism is heavily inspired by utilitarian principles. Effective Altruists use empirical evidence and rigorous calculation (a modern form of the Hedonic Calculus) to determine how their resources, time, and money can achieve the greatest good for the greatest number. This practical, data-driven application demonstrates the continued relevance of **utilitarianism** in shaping real-world ethical choices and large-scale philanthropic initiatives.

## Further Reading

[Utilitarianism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: The History of Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham

John Stuart Mill

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