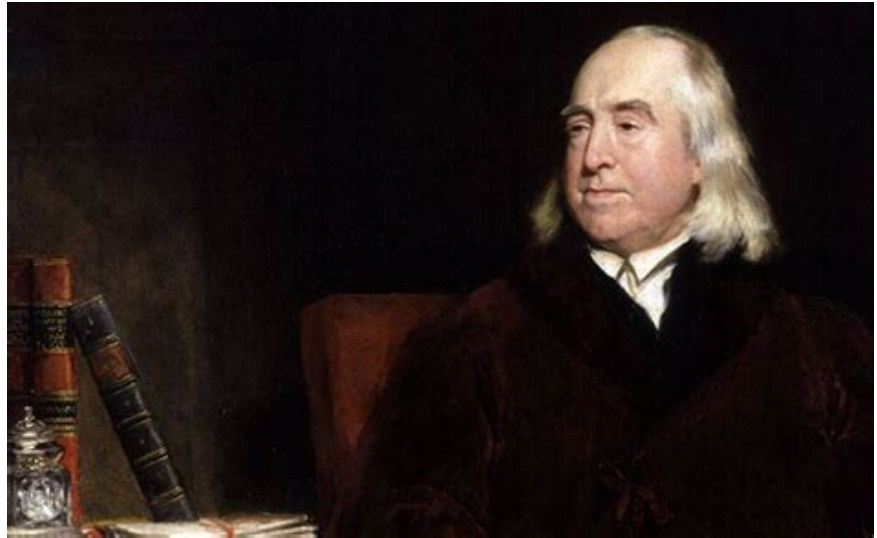


# UTILITARIANISM

Jeremy Bentham | John Stuart Mill | Consequentialism

## Key Concepts

- Utilitarianism comes from the word utility, or usefulness.
- The system came about in reaction to taking the decision-making power away from the individual in systems where the government would tell its citizens is right.
- In favor of democracy  
Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill believed that an ethical system should involve and value the individual as well as the society.
- Not too far away from Hedonism, Utilitarianism maintains that happiness is the greatest ethical good.
- Further, given their commitment to results, whatever produces the greatest amount of happiness is the greatest good. This built the key phrase for utilitarianism, "The greatest good for the greatest number of people".



## The “Greatest Good”

Utilitarianism can be summarized in three main points:

- Happiness is the only thing that is intrinsically good. Only pain (or unhappiness) is evil in itself.
- No one persons (including our own) happiness is more valuable than that of any other. Therefore, we should seek the pleasure of the greatest number.
- The only thing that is ethically significant in judging an action is the result. Since happiness is the only intrinsic good, it is the result to be pursued.



### *Positive Aspects of Utilitarianism*

- One reason utilitarianism looks so plausible is that it links doing good and happiness. That we do naturally seek happiness is hard to deny. What kind of world would it be if goodness made people miserable. Thus, connecting happiness with good and unhappiness with evil rings true.
- Another attractive feature for many is that utilitarianism is oriented to results. Because it requires that beliefs be empirically verifiable, it gives people a way to keep subjective elements from creeping into their ethical decisions.
- A third positive point is the versatility of the approach. When we make social policy decisions on such diverse issues as taxation, education or criminal law, it is difficult to think of a better approach than respect for the greatest happiness for the majority. It seems just as natural to apply this principle to decisions of personal morality.
- Finally, utilitarianism offers a means of balancing individual freedoms with social obligations. On the one side, it allows for equality: The happiness of each person is of equal importance. Individual interests receive consideration alongside the desires of all others. On the other side, it recognizes that society cannot survive without concessions by individual members. Thus, with the "one person, one vote" concept implicit in utilitarianism, each person is free to say what will bring him happiness, but ultimately each person has to accept the decision of the majority.

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### *Negative Aspects of Utilitarianism*

#### **Can we really ever know the results?**

- If our actions are judged by their consequence, then decisions about the goodness of our actions are dependent on knowing something that is still in the future. And because the future by definition is unknowable, then we are left in a kind of ethical limbo until we know whether the results we anticipate come to pass.

#### **How do we compare results?**

- Just as we do not know the future for certain, we also do not know "what would have happened if...?" Take for example the assassination of JFK. All of us would probably denounce such a terrible act of violence, right? But let's say that JFK was planning on testing a biological warfare weapon on a poverty stricken nation a month after he was actually assassinated. According to the ethic of utilitarianism, while JFK lost his life, the act of murder was actually morally praiseworthy in reality because it saved the lives of thousands. We just don't stand in a good position to know, what would happen if..

### Can we know the extent of the consequences?

- Utilitarianism requires that we do the "greatest good" and that it be for the "greatest number of people". But can we really know how many people will be affected? Have there been people in your life that have profoundly affected you in a positive way, a friend, acquaintance, etc. And because of that person, you have become a better person who will handoff that legacy to your children or others around you. Likewise, perhaps you have profoundly hurt by alcoholism, drug abuse, etc. and because of that you don't trust people. The influences of others' decisions on your life will never be fully known.
- Further, the greatest good or greatest happiness assumes we know what constitutes happiness for other people. Perhaps, we think we are acting for others' happiness when in fact we are making them miserable. Let's say Chuck decides that he wants to make a huge impact on other people's lives and becomes a motivational speaker, markets his events well, has thousands to show up and hear him speak, but in reality his message is boring, simplistic and in some cases false. He acts out of the utilitarian principle that he is spreading the love, when in fact, he is making people miserable.



#### *Illustration:*

Faced with a lack of energy-generating capacity, Salem had to determine the best solution to a problem. This problem was not just political, because it involved questions of taxation, possible relocation of people from homes or jobs, subjecting those nearby to potential health hazards, and other ethical concerns. According to utilitarianism, the moral solution would be the one that involved the least amount of pain and maximized happiness. Every form of power facility considered (hydroelectric, solar, wind)

and had its good and bad points. However, it came down that a nuclear power plant provided too much of a danger should it malfunction and spread nuclear waste all over the city. Thus, though expensive, the alternative sources of power were chosen. However, a year after the plant was built at high expense (unhappiness) new nuclear technologies came out that solved all the potential problems of building a nuclear plant at a much lower cost.

This analogy also goes to prove that utilitarianism cannot tell us at what time we *should* act. In this case, the greatest happiness would have been brought about by simply waiting one year to build the power plant.