

Utilitarianism - key features

- Welfarism:** Something is morally good or bad because of its impact on human welfare. Utilitarians have not always had the same view on how to measure this impact.
- Hedonistic utilitarianism:** The early utilitarians were hedonistic utilitarians, i.e. the good was associated with happiness/pleasure and the absence of pain.
- Ideal utilitarianism:** More recently this has been called 'objective list utilitarianism'. The list might include things such as knowledge and beauty.
- Preference Satisfaction Utilitarianism:** Instead of trying to identify a list this approach allows each individual to say what their own preferences might be.
- Consequentialism:** Bentham and Mill make it clear that **motive** is not relevant in determining whether an action is good or bad. Motives may be relevant in determining whether or not someone is a good or bad person. Traditionally, it is the **actual consequences** that determine whether an action is good or bad. However, in deciding on a course of action, it is necessary to consider the possible consequences of an action. In deciding whether the best course of action has been followed it is necessary to consider the likely consequences that will have come about if a different course of action had been followed. There is a suggestion in Mill that whilst actual consequences might determine whether an action is good or bad it is the **intended consequences** that determine the morality of an action. Since a course of action might be more or less well thought through it has been suggested that the **reasonably foreseeable consequences** also need to be considered.
- Universalism:** Utilitarianism requires everyone who will be affected by an action to be considered.
- Impartiality:** Bentham says, 'each person is to count for one and no one for more than one'. One person's happiness/pleasure counts for no more than anyone else's. The obvious criticism of this is that we do feel special obligations to those close to us and would tend to favour them over others. Later utilitarians respond to this objection by arguing that in practice impartiality does not mean ignoring family ties – the pleasure I gain by preferring those close to me has to be factored in to the decision and so, all other things being equal, happiness is likely to be maximised by me preferring those I love. Secondly, the bigger picture has to be considered. Ties of affection are a prime source of happiness and if utilitarianism advocated ignoring those then the result would be a net decrease in human happiness. Although each unit of happiness experienced has the same value, recognising special obligations, so it is argued, will have a tendency to increase not decrease happiness/pleasure.
- Aggregating:** Traditionally, utilitarianism has said that it is the sum total of happiness that matters. This partly explains why Bentham and others moved away from saying 'The greatest good for the greatest number'. Assume there are two options, A&B, and three people who would benefit in different ways from these options. In the following, the letters represent the units of happiness associated with each option.
- Person 1: AAB Person 2: AAB Person 3: ABBBB
- 'The greatest good for the greatest number' implies going with option A, which is the greatest good for two out of the three, but when the units are aggregated option B is to be preferred as there are six Bs and only five As.
- Maximising:** As implied by the phrase 'The Greatest Happiness Principle', utilitarianism has traditionally argued that the aim should be to maximise happiness even if this means some individuals are worse off.