

## Utilitarianism

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‘Utilitarianism’ is the concept that one must maximize the good from his or her action, thus it is a form of ‘consequentialism’ which primarily focuses on the outcomes of actions. ‘Consequentialism’ is a ‘teleological’ position which is to say that it focuses on end results or goals as opposed to the process. The principle of ‘utility’ is that it determines what is right or wrong based on the amount of good, pleasure, or happiness is brought from the said action. There are two main categories of utilitarianism. The first of which is ‘rule utilitarianism,’ the second is ‘act utilitarianism.’ Two of the most famous utilitarian philosophers includes Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. This paper shall go over the two types of utilitarianism and their differences, as well as Mill’s ‘rule utilitarianism.’ I shall also provide evidence of how ‘rule utilitarianism’ can possibly become ‘act utilitarianism.’

‘Rule utilitarianism’ focuses on the end results while also holding dear to certain rules in accordance to obtaining that desired and maximized goal or result. ‘Rule utilitarians’ will tend to hold the concept of Liberty, for example, closely without alienation even if the end result is less good than would be had they not regarded it with value. These particular utilitarians claim that there are certain unalienable rules innate to human nature and society that need to be maintained, while also following these rules tends to maximize the greatest amount of good without as great a sacrifice as would be without them.

A more specific example of ‘rule utilitarianism’ would be on the concept of

slavery. In most utilitarian philosophies, the concept of a few being enslaved for the betterment of the vast majority is permissible because the end results are solely crucial when judging what is 'good.' 'Rule utilitarianism' would suggest that slavery does not provide the greatest end results because the number of enslaved lessens the various contributions that the rest are able to do without being enslaved. It would also suggest that to infringe on the rights of a few is to infringe upon the rights of all, since everyone is equally subject to the rest at any given point. Therefore, a 'rule utilitarian' would declare slavery as being both wrong for its end results and the rule of protecting each person's right to not be enslaved. Nevertheless, if it was shown to a 'rule utilitarian' that slavery still bettered the ends of the majority, they would say the rule still holds true that slavery is a risk and not worth breaking for its negative consequences.

'Act utilitarianism' is the more traditional view of 'utilitarianism' in that it seeks the utmost pleasure or happiness in outcome without much regard for the process or what is done in order to obtain those ends. This is the classic type of 'utilitarianism' opposed by the philosopher Immanuel Kant. According to many critics of 'act utilitarianism,' like Kant, it leads to hedonism. 'Hedonism,' in the modern layman's sense of the word, is much like 'act utilitarianism' in that it only pursues happiness and pleasurable ends, weighing in on a hierarchical scale to determine what provides the greatest amount of pleasure; the greater the pleasure, the greater the good. These critics will also suggest that this leads to gluttony, desensitization, the overall destruction of the person engaging in such a behavior, and a detriment to society as a whole, making it not as good as the 'act utilitarian' would perceive. Yet, 'act utilitarianism' is at least quantifiable in determining

what is good or bad, while most other moral philosophies are unable to show in number why things are good or bad.

An example of 'act utilitarianism' would be if someone had slaves in order to yield greater crops, or run a factory more efficiently, all for the betterment of a societal majority and with impunity. This would ensure cheaper products for those in the society at the expense of only a few slaves, while simultaneously financially benefiting the slave master. Unlike a 'rule utilitarian' who would say the sacrifice of Liberty, or subjecting people to chattel slavery, is not worth the end results, 'act utilitarians' hold that the only parameter to be concerned with in this scenario is the final utility of financial gains and society price alleviation which in turn makes the vast majority of people happier than without.

John Stuart Mill was a 'rule utilitarian' who stipulated in his famous work *On Liberty* that people cannot be subjected to slavery since Liberty is a natural right that people have. However, he also suggests that it may be permissible that one can choose to become a slave, but finds this somewhat paradoxical. This is based on the philosophy of contract law where a person with Reason can decide what is best for himself (Mill 173). However, this most likely does not include chattel slavery where the will of a person is totally subjected to that of another person; it is more plausible that it would only be acceptable in serfdom or other less innocuous forms of slavery as practiced by the Greeks, Romans, British, etc.

In this manner it can be suggested that submitting one's self to any form of slavery can take 'rule utilitarianism' and collapse it into 'act utilitarianism,' in that it ignores any

sense of duty to one's self and one's own inalienable rights. This would also be such a rare case when giving up one's own Liberty for the benefits of becoming a slave are greater than maintaining individual freedom, making it highly unlikely especially in today's world. It would, more often than not, behoove an individual to suffer through the daily grind, toil, and struggles of life with Liberty than to subject themselves to slavery in order to best gain the most happiness and pleasure in life as an end result or after a period of progression.

Overall, 'utilitarianism' has some significant standing in the field of morality and ethics, especially with practical applications of democracy. However, as we have seen, it can also have some serious failures in dealing with Liberty and the topic of slavery. Nevertheless, it is imperative that end results be taken into account with moral and political decisions.

#### Work Cited

Mill, John Stuart, and Gertrude HIMMELFARB. *On Liberty. Edited with an Introduction by Gertrude Himmelfarb.* Penguin, 1974.