

Evaluation of Utilitarianism

1. **What** are the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism?

Utilitarianism has various strengths and weaknesses. Its strengths include the fact that it is based on a single principle that is easy to understand (i.e. utility). Additionally, its concern with what people intuitively believe ethics is about (i.e. promoting pleasure and preventing pain) makes it commonsensical. And its consideration of consequences makes it forward-thinking, which helps address issues in environmental ethics (among other things). Finally, utilitarianism is supported by human nature, underpins all ethical systems, and is easy to justify compared with other theories (all of which are discussed further below). Its weaknesses include the fact that it is hard to formulate because classical utilitarianism does not clarify whether its adherents should seek the greatest total pleasure or the greatest average pleasure. Additionally, the need to calculate potential consequences in the unknowable future makes it more difficult to apply than it initially appears. And the lack of public laws in act utilitarianism makes it impossible to adopt in a large society (without public laws, critics claim society would descend into anarchy). Finally, utilitarianism prohibits people from resting, rule utilitarianism is incoherent, and all types of utilitarianism appear to permit evil in some circumstances (all of which are discussed further below).

2. **How** do the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism work?



A model brain: a representation of the centre of the human nervous system.

Some strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism are particularly robust, and these are the ones used to support the most convincing cases for and against this normative ethical theory. Some of the most persuasive arguments supporting utilitarianism were proposed by its first and most fervent advocates: Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Others have been proposed since, most notably by Peter Singer (b. 1946). The most serious criticisms of utilitarianism come from various places. Recently, philosophers like Louis Pojman (1935-2005), Brad Hooker (b. 1957), and Stephen Nathanson (1943) have surveyed these criticisms and commented on the most convincing of them. In the text below, the strengths are listed in the first row, and the weaknesses are listed in the second.

Supported by nature: Jeremy Bentham argued that the experience of pain and pleasure governs human behaviour, directing people to avoid the former and pursue the latter. Utilitarianism is the most appropriate and effective normative ethical theory because it embraces the reality of human nature by working with the nervous system.

Prohibits rest: Louis Pojman argued that utilitarianism requires people to constantly evaluate potential actions and choose only those that maximise utility. Enjoying leisure time or resting are unlikely to accomplish this; consequently, consistently applying utilitarianism requires the near superhuman ability to always and selflessly consider others.

Underpins all ethics: John Stuart Mill argued that the principle of utility provides the foundation for all normative ethical theories. However, over time, other theories built secondary principles on this foundation that are slavishly observed even when they no longer maximise utility. Utilitarianism reduces ethics to its central principle.

Not coherent: most modern critics argue that rule utilitarianism is incoherent because it must be deontological (i.e. duty-based) unless a rule can be broken in a situation in which it does not maximise utility. However, if rules can be broken in certain situations on a case-by-case basis then rule utilitarianism is no different from act utilitarianism.

Easy to justify: Peter Singer argues that the application of the principle of equality (i.e. treat like cases alike) distinguishes ethical thinking from pre-ethical thinking. Moving from the principle of equality to preference utilitarianism is a small and easily justified step. Other ethical theories (e.g. natural law and virtue ethics) require much more justification.

Permits evil: one of the most damning criticisms of utilitarianism is that it allows immoral means to achieve moral ends. In other words, utilitarians can lie, torture, or wrongfully imprison innocent people as long as it maximises utility. Critics of utilitarianism argue that some or all of these actions are impossible to justify regardless of outcome.

3. Why are the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism important?

Ethicists can use the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism to evaluate the theory as a whole. They can do this by judging different types of utilitarianism using criteria devised for evaluating normative ethical theories. Arguably, the most important test is whether or not a theory promotes good. Proponents of act and rule utilitarianism claim these theories do because they are supported by nature: human beings are hardwired to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, and "good" is the label applied to this. However, critics of preference utilitarianism claim the theory is not clearly supported by nature because pursuing pleasure is not the same as pursuing preference (although it may frequently overlap); consequently, they accuse it of promoting evil in certain circumstances, which counts against it. Another test of utilitarianism is whether or not it agrees with our deepest moral intuitions. Most people accept its commonsensical suggestions (i.e. that people generally seek pleasure and avoid pain) agree with our deepest moral intuitions about what ethics should be concerned with. The strengths and weaknesses can also help evaluate whether or not utilitarianism can be universalised. Critics claim that act utilitarianism cannot because it does not contain the publishable rules required by a functioning society, whilst preference utilitarianism cannot because calculating and weighing preferences is too hard in practice.



Prison: utilitarianism can be used to justify evil (e.g. the imprisonment of innocents).

George Thinks

Knowing the purported strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism is absolutely vital to formulating a considered opinion about whether or not it's any good as an ethical theory. In my opinion, Peter Singer's brief but persuasive point from the opening pages of *Practical Ethics* is one of the most compelling arguments for utilitarianism: it's a tiny step from accepting the principle of equality (which differentiates ethical thought from pre-ethical thought) to preference utilitarianism (which provides the scaffolding for meaningfully applying it). The point is this: any normative ethical theory that takes more steps than this needs to explain why they're needed. Peter Singer claims that considerable moral argumentation is required and ultimately leaves open the question of whether or not an alternative theory has ever provided it. Nevertheless, the fact that utilitarianism permits evil under certain circumstances is problematic. However, the cases contrived to demonstrate this seem unlikely to occur frequently and a close reading of classical utilitarians provides some defence to this weakness.

