Society and Utilitarianism

1. **What** is the relationship between society and utilitarianism?

The relationship between society and utilitarianism is defined by what utilitarianism and society are. To recap, utilitarianism is a teleological ethical theory that promotes actions that produce the most good for those affected by them (e.g. human beings). On the other hand, a society is a community of members who interact with one another in an organised fashion and share common activities and traditions. Although societies can operate at various scales, in this context, the word "society" refers to a community of citizens who are all members of the same nation-state (e.g. British society).

Society: a community of members that interact in an organised fashion.

In the United Kingdom, the relationship between society and utilitarianism is self-reinforcing. The classical utilitarians, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), were inspired by the need for social reform; in their day, they could see that morals and laws exacerbated pain and suffering in society. Likewise, negative utilitarianism and preference utilitarianism arose from two social crises in the twentieth century: World War II and globalisation. In turn, since its inception and development into several different types, utilitarianism has influenced society. In more economically developed countries, it has had a pronounced impact on economic policy and legal change. In the United Kingdom, it even affects how medicines and treatments are evaluated for the National Health Service (NHS).

2. **How** does the relationship between society and utilitarianism work?

In more economically developed countries, the relationship between society and utilitarianism is often most obvious in two areas: economic policy and legal change. Economic policy is the system by which national governments influence societies using various processes (e.g. taxation, and nationalisation); legal change is the process by which laws are enacted (i.e. created), amended, or repealed (i.e. abolished) by legislatures. In the United Kingdom, utilitarianism has a significant impact on the process of technology appraisal undertaken by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) to identify the most cost-effective medicines and treatments for the NHS.

Economic policy: in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, economic policy is publicly professed as a set of processes that government should optimise to maximise happiness across society. Consequently, the former chair of the United States Federal Reserve, Ben Bernanke (b. 1953), claims, "The ultimate purpose of economics... is to understand and promote the enhancement of well-being." Although the extent to which economic policy achieves this aim is arguable, it enhances wellbeing across society to a far greater degree than economic policy did in the nineteenth century, which it is reasonable to partially attribute to the influence of utilitarianism.

Legal change: Jeremy Bentham claimed that utilitarianism should underpin legal change with the words, "The greatest happiness for the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation". In mature democracies, legislators increasingly pass laws designed to promote pleasure and prevent pain across society. Although the extent of this remains debatable, a general trend is apparent.

Drugs: NICE undertakes a cost-benefit analysis on drugs before use by the NHS.

Technology appraisal: in the United Kingdom, the NHS does not have an unlimited budget; consequently, NICE carefully considers the costs and benefits of medicines and treatments before making them available to society. In its evaluations, inexpensive medicines for common conditions are usually favoured over expensive medicines for rare diseases; a clear example of utilitarianism.

3. **Why** is the relationship between society and utilitarianism important?

The relationship between society and utilitarianism is important for several reasons; however, one of the most important appears to be how utilitarianism reinforces democracy. In 2019, the Pew Research Center released the results of an international survey into rates of satisfaction with democracy. Only 33 per cent of Canadians, 36 per cent of Germans, and 28 per cent of Swedes reported dissatisfaction with how democracy works in their respective countries. Conversely, 59 per cent of Americans and 69 per cent of Brits reported dissatisfaction with democratic government. Is this disparity any surprise when economic policy and legal change have made the United Kingdom and the United States two of the most unequal of all Western societies?

Additionally, the relationship is important because of utilitarianism's far-reaching effects; it impacts areas of life as diverse as economic policy and medical treatment. Although this is arguably true of other ethical theories, much of their influence is historical; today, utilitarian calculations appear more widespread than those related to other systems of ethics. Furthermore, it is fortunate, at least for the most disadvantaged in society. Although great inequalities remain, life is probably better for the poorest people in the Western world than it was in pre-industrial and pre-utilitarian times. Finally, it is fundamental; not only is utilitarianism apparently essential to reported levels of satisfaction with democracy, but it may even be necessary to its continued survival.

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Fairly transparently, as you may have worked out, I think utilitarianism is really tightly entwined with the way most societies work, at least in more economically developed countries. Theoretically, the whole point of democracy is to give people an equal say in the way society is governed. If you accomplish that, you're already working within a broadly utilitarian framework. If people vote for what's good for them, then you should end up with a government that maximises pleasure and minimises pain across society. Consequently, whilst I can't call myself a utilitarian, I do have a lot of sympathy for the theory. I think it's good for democracy; in fact, without at least some degree of utilitarian decision-making, I think democratic government is impossible.

But, and this is a big caveat, I'm pretty unconvinced by the degree to which utilitarianism is actually entwined in the running of a number of the world's richest nations. The Electoral Reform Society estimates that approximately 70 per cent of British voters are ignored because of the first past the post system. Consequently, in the 2019 general election, even though almost three per cent of voters supported the Green Party, only 0.2 per cent of Parliament (i.e. one person) is Green. Issues like this undermine the extent to which utilitarian principles can ever really be enacted and is one of the reasons (at least to my mind) why so many Brits (69 per cent) think democracy isn't working for them; almost the same percentage whose votes didn't have any effect on the 2019 election.