

Application of Utilitarianism

1. What is the application of utilitarianism?

The application of utilitarianism involves an identical process to the application of any normative ethical theory. This process begins with identifying an ethical issue in a branch of applied ethics (e.g. animal ethics or military ethics). Once an issue is identified, the normative ethical theory is applied by asking how an adherent of the theory would address the issue. There are various ethical issues across every branch of applied ethics; however, some are more central to modern life than others. Of these, a handful are especially challenging to resolve satisfactorily. These include the issues of medical research in animal ethics and nuclear deterrence in military ethics.



A laboratory rat: in the United Kingdom, over 230,000 rats are experimented on each year.

Medical research: the question of whether or not human beings should conduct animal experiments to develop drugs and treatments is an issue in animal ethics. In the United Kingdom, approximately 3.4 million animals are experimented on in some way each year; of these, researchers acknowledge that approximately 550,000 experience moderate or severe suffering.

Nuclear deterrence: the question of whether or not people should possess nuclear weapons with which to deter others from waging war is an issue in military ethics. Around the world, there are approximately 14,000 nuclear weapons controlled by nine countries (China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, and the United Kingdom).

2. How does the application of utilitarianism work?

Utilitarianism and animal ethics: applying utilitarianism to the issue of medical research involves evaluating the effects of animal experimentation using the principle of utility. It requires calculating the amount of pain and pleasure that medical research produces for the human beings and animals affected by it. In the past, these calculations were relatively straightforward because some utilitarians excluded animal pain and pleasure from their calculations; however, most modern utilitarians include it. According to its proponents, animal experimentation produces a tremendous amount of pleasure, in the form of lifesaving and pain-relieving drugs and treatments, for human beings and some animals (e.g. livestock and pets). However, according to its opponents, the picture is decidedly more muddled. For example, some animal experiments are badly designed so produce worthless results, many are entirely speculative and have no real-world purpose, and others can never proceed to human trials because of the physiological differences between the experimental animals and people. Additionally, many illnesses are the consequence of unhealthy lifestyles (e.g. obesity-related diseases); should thousands of animals have to suffer and die to develop drugs and treatments that wouldn't be necessary if people ate less? For modern-day utilitarians, these problems raise plenty of questions with much medical research involving animal experiments.

Utilitarianism and military ethics: applying utilitarianism to the issue of nuclear deterrence involves evaluating the effects of possessing nuclear weapons using the principle of utility. It requires calculating the amount of pain and pleasure that nuclear deterrence produces for the people affected by it. According to its proponents, the threat of nuclear holocaust has produced an almost unprecedented period of peace and prosperity, but it remains a highly controversial strategic position. According to its opponents, the policy of mutually assured destruction has led to at least 15 documented nuclear close-calls in which weapons of mass destruction have almost been launched accidentally. Utilitarians are required to balance any benefits of nuclear deterrence against the possibility of complete catastrophe involving human extinction.



A submarine: the United Kingdom maintains a global, submarine-based nuclear deterrent.

3. Why is the application of utilitarianism important?

The application of utilitarianism is important because it informs how utilitarians should respond to specific issues in applied ethics. The process will influence different types of utilitarians in different ways, depending on the emphases of their particular type. For example, act utilitarians, inspired by Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) work, would likely reject almost all animal experiments for medical research, except those from which significant direct benefits were certain and the known harms relatively limited. On the other hand, it is unclear how act utilitarians would respond to the issue of nuclear deterrence. Although Jeremy Bentham claimed, "The most grievous of all profusion is that which is laid out in war," he never envisaged the development of weapons of mass destruction or their use as a perpetual strategic threat instead of actual bombs. In this instance, much depends upon the weight the individual act utilitarian gives to the possibility that nuclear deterrence will go wrong in a way that causes tremendous pain and suffering.

Rule utilitarians, inspired by John Stuart Mill's (1806-1873) work, would likely come to similar conclusions but for slightly different reasons. Unlike Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill claimed some pleasures are intrinsically more valuable than others (i.e. higher pleasures), which gives the pleasures that human beings experience greater weight than those of animals. He argued his case with the famous statement, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied." On this basis, rule utilitarians may accept speculative animal experimentation for purposes only loosely related to medical research because it produces higher pleasures (e.g. intellectual stimulation). Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe rule utilitarians would accept nuclear deterrence for similar reasons to act utilitarians. Additionally, a simple rule accepting nuclear deterrence would grant every country the right to develop nuclear deterrents. The ensuing proliferation of warheads would significantly increase the risk of catastrophe, so rule utilitarians would likely prefer a simple rule banning them instead.

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Applying utilitarianism is hard enough when satisfying the principle of utility only requires a modest calculation involving a handful of people. The issue with the rightness or wrongness of medical research and nuclear deterrence is that they involve impossible calculations, at least as far as I'm concerned. This being said, medical research appears to be wrong, in most cases, according to any logically consistent application of utilitarianism that gives appropriate consideration to the experiences of all sentient beings. Even Jeremy Bentham knew that the way we treat animals is unjustifiable under the principle of utility when fairly applied. Applying utilitarianism to nuclear deterrence is a tougher question. Some people try to distinguish between deterrence and use, but I think this distinction is hair-splitting nonsense because deterrence requires the possibility of use. As long as there's the possibility of use, then there's the possibility of unleashing pain and suffering on an almost unfathomable scale. But this isn't the conclusion others come to, so it's certainly up for debate.

