

Mill & Singer's Utilitarianism

What you need to know:

John Stuart Mill's qualitative hedonistic utilitarianism (higher and lower pleasures) and his 'proof' of the greatest happiness principle
act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism
non-hedonistic utilitarianism (including preference utilitarianism)

Key terms

Higher Pleasures: Pleasures of the mind and superior to physical pleasures, they last longer. Examples reading, listening to high quality music.

Lower Pleasures: Pleasures of the body, short lasting. Sex, eating chocolate and taking drugs.

Act utilitarianism: an action is good if it brings about more pleasure than pain.

Rule utilitarianism: you should follow general rules, which brings about more pleasure than pain e.g. 'do not kill', 'do not steal'.

Strong Rule Utilitarianism: you should follow the rule no matter the consequences of breaking the rule in a particular circumstance.

Weak Rule Utilitarianism: allows that there may be exceptions to the rule and sometimes the rule needs to be broken to maximize happiness.

Non-hedonistic utilitarianism: a form of utilitarianism that seeks to maximise something. However, it is not only pleasure that is maximised.

Manifest preference: what people say they prefer

Idealized preference: what people would prefer if they had all the information.

Possible Exam Questions

What is the difference between higher and lower pleasures? (3 marks)

Outline Mill's qualitative hedonistic utilitarianism. (5 marks)

Outline Mill's 'proof' of the greatest happiness principle. (5 marks)

What is the difference between act and rule utilitarianism? (3 marks)

Explain the similarities and differences between Bentham and Mill's Utilitarianism. (12 marks)

Explain Mill's qualitative Utilitarianism and the criticism of elitism/cultural snobbery. (12 marks)

Outline non-hedonistic utilitarianism (5 marks)

Outline preference utilitarianism (5 marks)

How convincing is utilitarianism as an account of what makes an action morally right? (25 marks)

Mill's qualitative hedonistic utilitarianism

Mill agreed with Bentham that:

1. The moral value of any act is calculated by considering its consequences (hence it is a consequentialist theory).
2. Good acts are those that apply the principle of utility: the greatest happiness for the greatest number.
3. Good acts maximise pleasure and minimise pain.

However, Mill believed there was a difference between higher pleasures and lower pleasures. Higher pleasures are pleasures of the mind, such as reading, art, music, whereas lower pleasures are pleasures of the body. Mill believed we should seek higher pleasures rather than lower pleasures.



Criticisms of Mill

- Are we really still trying to maximize pleasure? Mill calls himself a utilitarian (we should seek the greatest pleasure) but really Mill is saying we should seek things that give less pleasure if they are a more worthy pleasure.
- Utilitarianism loses its simplicity
- Cultural Snobbery: do 'higher pleasures' really just mean 'the things that Mill and his friends like to do'?

Singer's Preference Utilitarianism

Preference Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory. It states that an action should be judged by how it conforms to the preferences of all those affected by the action (and its consequences). A good act is one which maximises the satisfaction of the preferences of all those involved.



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Mill's 'proof' of the greatest happiness principle

Mill claimed that the ultimate principles of morality, like all first principles cannot be proven, but reasons/facts can be given for believing these principles. His 'proof' looks like this:

1. The only evidence that something is visible is that it can actually be seen
2. Similarly, the only evidence that something is desirable is that it is actually desired.
3. Each person desires their own happiness
4. Therefore, each person's happiness is desirable.
5. If each person's happiness is desirable, then the general happiness is desirable.

In this way Mill shows that:

- Happiness is a good
- Each person's happiness is good to that person
- The general happiness is good to the aggregate of all persons

Criticisms of Mill's Proof

Hume's 'is/ought' fallacy: you cannot derive an 'ought' (how one should behave) from an 'is' (what is factually true) as an 'ought' is a judgement of value and an 'is' is a judgement of reason. Judgements of reason and value are different to each other.

Equivocation (Moore): 'desirable' is being used by Mill in two different ways:

- Desirable = that which is **able** to be desired (this could be anything, even paedophilia, owning slaves, global domination)
- Desirable = that which **ought** to be desired e.g. Reducing class sizes in schools is a desirable aim. it's regarded as a highly desirable job, the house is in a very desirable area of the city.

Fallacy of Composition: just because it is good for each of us to be happy, it does not follow that it is good for humanity to be happy. Humanity doesn't have desires.