

# Utilitarianism

Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>Happiness</b> – it seems right that happiness is given intrinsic value. How can happiness be a bad thing?	<b>Other goods</b> – ‘Happiness’ is not the only thing that is of intrinsic worth. For example, love, human life, freedom.
<b>Harm</b> – again, Utilitarianism seems to be in line with our intuitions that harming people is intrinsically wrong.	<b>Mechanical</b> – Utilitarianism reduces morality to simple maths. It loses a sense of what is truly valuable in life.
<b>Greatest good</b> – It does follow from the above that the right course of action is the one that leads to the most happiness and least harm. It makes sense.	<b>The ends don’t justify the means</b> – Imagine I killed one healthy person and gave their organs to save 5 others. The balance of happiness over harm supports doing this, but we know that it is not right.
<b>Improvements</b> – The theory has been adapted and improved over time. Modern Utilitarians have a much better theory than Bentham’s.	<b>Unpredictable</b> – You can’t actually know what is going to happen in the future, so it is wrong to base our ethical choices on what may or may not come about in the future.
<b>Quality</b> – Mill answered a valid criticism of Bentham’s theory, that the pleasure of sadistic torturers is not good. He said the quality of pleasure was important – an improvement to the theory.	<b>Immeasurable</b> – You can’t assign a value to an amount of pleasure. It is impossible to compare the pleasure of getting a new job with the joy of having sex or the satisfaction of washing your car.
<b>Intention</b> – Sidgwick answered Kant’s criticism that the consequences of an action can’t make the action right. He said the intention to bring about the greater good was important – another improvement.	<b>Incalculable</b> – Even if you could give each possible pleasure a numerical value, the consequences of even the smallest of our choices on everyone are so vast that we couldn’t possibly calculate them all.
<b>Preferences</b> – Singer realised that people have different ideas of what ‘happiness’ is, and that some don’t even choose happiness. Instead, he thought that our preferences are important – a further improvement. If you disagree with what Singer does, that’s just one preference that needs to be weighed against all others.	<b>Motivation</b> – Knowing that something would promote the ‘greater good’ is not enough to motivate me to do it. Singer hits this problem when trying to convince people to give more to developing countries. We know our money could do so much more in Africa, we just don’t care enough to give more.
<b>Secular</b> – Utilitarianism doesn’t rely on specific beliefs about God. In the modern, multicultural society with a range of religious beliefs and a growing number of atheists, a secular theory is most useful.	<b>People can’t be trusted</b> – If you get rid of rules and allow people to choose to act in the greater good, they will actually act selfishly, then try to justify their actions by claiming they were in the greater good.
<b>Easy to use</b> – Weighing up the positive and negative effects of our actions is straightforward – we learn to do this from our early childhood onwards. Anyone can apply the principle of utility.	<b>Justice</b> – Our view of justice is that everyone should be treated fairly. Utilitarianism allows us to sacrifice individuals for the greater good. Many people would see this as unfair.
<b>Democratic</b> – The fairest way to run a country is to balance everyone’s differing interests. We see this happening in all modern democracies – governments use the principles of Utilitarianism to determine what is right.	<b>Tyranny of the majority</b> – For example, if most people feel strongly against homosexuality, this would justify laws against practicing homosexuality. This is confusing what is popular with what is right.
<b>Objective</b> – The positive and negative consequences of our actions can be measured. This gives us an objective, independent way of deciding on what is right and wrong.	<b>Subjective</b> – We all have different definitions of happiness. Even with Singer’s talk of ‘preferences’, we would all differ in the weight we gave to, say, a Muslim’s preference to wear a hijab in public against another person’s preference to ban hijabs in public places.
<b>Universal</b> – Every culture has its own rules, which shows that deontological theories are wrong about universal rules. However, the principle of utility, reducing harming and increasing happiness, is universal, and applies in every culture.	<b>Naturalistic Fallacy</b> – Just because people desire pleasure, this doesn’t make pleasure desirable. Put another way, just because the majority of people would prefer something, doesn’t mean that they <i>ought to</i> prefer it or that it’s right to do it.
<b>It works</b> – If Utilitarianism is properly applied, it works. People criticise it by describing negative consequences of Utilitarianism. However, if there are negative consequences, that just means the theory hasn’t been properly applied.	<b>Wrong</b> – Utilitarianism is just wrong about ethics. Eg. a group of policemen passed around photos of an abused woman for their own enjoyment. When it was exposed, the consequences were very bad. But would it have been right if no one else found out? It wasn’t the bad consequences that made it wrong, it was the act itself.