

Utilitarianism: The Dominant Ethical Theory

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Right versus wrong; good and bad; negative and positive are all concepts that exist in every aspect of our personal lives, business, politics, and culture in terms of defining proper ethical behavior. Ethics, by definition, is “that branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions.” (dictionary.com) This definition lays the foundation for understanding basic ethical theory and identifying the dominant ethical theories that impact our lives in society today. Since the dawn of time, some form of ethics and morals has guided people’s behaviors in society at large, down to the most basic rules within families; whether they have been widely popular or not. Although the type of ethical theory may change depending on how it is applied (i.e., ethics in business, ethics in law, ethics in religion, etc.) the number of ethical theories has expanded over time and may include as many as seven. However, the three major theories, from which all others derive are Utilitarian Ethics, Deontological Ethics, and Virtue Ethics each with its own moral strengths and weaknesses. While the types of theories have grown, utilitarian theory encompasses the basic overarching moral principles that are dominant in all ethical theories making it the dominant modern ethical theory in practice. To adequately understand its dominance, we must first briefly examine each of these theories.

First, utilitarian theory was developed by early thinkers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and it is defined as the moral doctrine that we should always act to produce the greatest possible balance of good over bad for everyone affected by our actions.

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(Shaw & Berry, 2015). From this basic definition, the fundamental building blocks of this theory are clear. In more concise terms, the application of utilitarian principles can be summed up as taking actions that result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. (Penn State Public Media, A. W., n.d.) To understand this concept, one could consider a democratic election as a distinct example of utilitarian theory. Here we see that the basic concept of good and bad shape the fundamental focus of the utilitarian ethical theory. In essence, utilitarianism holds to three basic principles:

- Pleasure or happiness is the only thing that truly has intrinsic value. (Westacott, E., n.d.)
- Actions are right insofar as they promote happiness, wrong insofar as they produce unhappiness. (Westacott, E., n.d.)
- Everyone's happiness counts equally. (Westacott, E., n.d.)

Secondly, the deontological approach has a slightly different fundamental focus.

This theory was developed by German philosopher Emanuel Kant and this theory is defined by the idea that actions are good or bad based on a clear set of rules. The name of the theory is derived from the Greek word Deon which means duty (The Elements of Philosophy, 2020) which points to the theory's core foundation being that people have an inherent duty to respect other people's rights and treat them accordingly. (Penn State Public Media, A. W., n.d.) Under this philosophy, an action is moral if it aligns with this fundamental duty to respect and dignity for all people. The action is directly related to the set of rules that govern the action. (The Elements of Philosophy, 2020) A person that exemplifies this theory would be a priest for example. A Christian priest believes that taking life is morally wrong and would seek to avoid doing so under all normal circumstances to preserve the overarching duty of all humans to treat everyone with dignity and respect. Deontology has one basic principle:

- Virtue is its own reward.

Third, we have virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is person rather than action based: it looks at the virtue or moral character of the person carrying out an action, rather than at ethical duties and rules, or the consequences of one's actions. (Introduction to ethics: Virtue ethics. n.d.) With virtue ethics, the virtue of the person taking the action is weighed more heavily than the action matters most. Originating in ancient Greek philosophy beginning with Socrates and later further developed by Plato Aristotle and the stoics. (Virtue Ethics, 2021)

The differences in the thought process of followers of these three philosophies is most cleverly described in the context of a popular movie The Dark Knight by White and Arp (2021) in an article Virtue Ethics (2021):

To illustrate the difference among three key moral philosophies, ethicists Mark White and Robert Arp refer to the film The Dark Knight where Batman can kill the Joker. Utilitarian's, White and Arp suggest, would endorse killing the Joker. By taking this one life, Batman could save multitudes. Deontologists, on the other hand, would reject killing the Joker simply because it is wrong to kill. But a virtue ethicist "would highlight the character of the person who kills the Joker. Does Batman want to be the kind of person who takes his enemies' lives?" No, in fact, he doesn't.

The basic principles of virtue ethics are as follows:

- An action is only right if it is an action that a virtuous person would carry out in the same circumstances. (Introduction to ethics: Virtue ethics., n.d.)
- A virtuous person is a person who acts virtuously. (Introduction to ethics: Virtue ethics., n.d.)

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- A person acts virtuously if they "possess and live the virtues." (Introduction to ethics: Virtue ethics., n.d.)
- A virtue is a moral characteristic that a person needs to live well. (Introduction to ethics: Virtue ethics., n.d.)

Now that a foundation for understanding has been laid between the three major ethical theories, the distinctions, pros, and cons become clearer. While all of these theories are, in their own way, promoting the highest ideals for human interaction, they all inherently have their strengths and weaknesses. But utilitarianism has clear advantages over both Deontological and Virtue ethics. When comparing utilitarianism and Deontology, some distinct differences come to light.

In the general sense, the comparison between these two schools of thought breaks down to a question of getting good results (Utilitarianism) or doing the right thing (deontology). Proponents of utilitarianism purport that it is the best because it promotes making life better by increasing the number of good things (like happiness and pleasure) in the world and decreasing negative things like pain and unhappiness. This commitment to the greater good, through result-driven actions produces better results for humanity. With that ideal (more good, less bad) as the guiding factor in taking action, inherently, the results will do the best for the most people and decrease bad outcomes. With deontology, the actions are based on a clear set of rules which dictate the moral actions to be taken. To exemplify the difference in the two philosophies and why utilitarianism is a superior ethical theory, consider this example shared by Guzman (2016):

Peter took his son to the doctor and found out that his son needs a very expensive surgery. Peter doesn't have enough time to earn the money needed for the surgery because his son is in a critical condition. Peter, not knowing what to do to save his son, decides to lie. Peter goes to a bank and asks for a personal loan intended to be for

investing in a new business that would generate a lot of revenue. Peter gets the money, goes to the hospital, pays for the surgery, and saves his son's life.

It is clear based on this story that if Peter were a deontologist, he would not have lied, and his son could have lost his life. Under utilitarian ethical logic, Peter did the right thing because he was able to be creative in his actions and save his son's life. In essence, no real harm was done, and a positive outcome was reached with Peter's son's life being saved. The deontologist's actions (not lying to raise the money) in this situation would have most likely led to a negative outcome for Peter's son. (Guzman, 2016) While utilitarianism overall is better, it does have its limitations. For example, even though utilitarian theory considers the result to determine the right action, it cannot predict the outcome which always leaves some room for error. (Tardi, 2021) Another weakness of the utilitarian theory points to the fact that some values can get lost in terms of individual rights and justice. To further highlight one weakness of Utilitarianism, Tardi's article (2021) offers the following example:

For example, say a hospital has four people whose lives depend upon receiving organ transplants: a heart, lungs, a kidney, and a liver. If a healthy person wanders into the hospital, his organs could be harvested to save four lives at the expense of his one life. This would arguably produce the greatest good for the greatest number. But few would consider it an acceptable course of action, let alone an ethical one.

Regarding a comparison between virtue and utilitarian ethics, utilitarianism is still a clearly better option.

With virtue ethics focusing on the virtue of the person taking the action and the ideal their degree of virtue makes the action right or wrong, an inherent weakness is in the fact the although

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a person is virtuous, they can take an action that leads to massive negative circumstances for many people. This notion puts too much weight on the virtue of a few people and doesn't clearly define what the virtues are that are determining the action unlike utilitarian thought which has clearly defined principles. (Strengths & Weaknesses of Virtue Ethics., n.d.) Furthermore, virtue ethics does not consider right or wrong. If the virtues are wrong or the person claiming to be virtuous is following skewed virtues and may have negative intentions could be trusted to make ethical decisions. (Strengths & Weaknesses of Virtue Ethics., n.d.) With regard to utilitarian philosophy, by considering the outcomes of specific decisions, inherently negative intentions, would be exposed and actions would be based on clearly standards and outcomes making ethical dilemmas more easily reconciled.

Although all disadvantages and advantages of all three of the major ethical theories could not be totally examined within the pages of this essay, for a society, utilitarianism works best. In fact, it more closely follows the democratic society in which we live in America. Even though some countries operate under dictatorships which resemble some of the other systems, utilitarianism has six more advantages which definitively set utilitarianism apart as the dominant ethical theory

1. **It is a universal concept that all of us can understand.** Everyone wants to be happy and can pursue happiness which is what happens in a democratic society.
2. **You don't need to practice a religion to benefit from this process.** This practice is not trying to find salvation for your soul. It won't dictate specific beliefs about God to ensure your inclusion. (Editor in Chief, 2019)

3. **Utilitarianism follows democratic principles.** The fastest and fairest way to make decisions on a nationwide scale is to balance the differing interest of people through a majority vote. (Editor in Chief, 2019) This is democracy.
4. **It uses an objective process to decide what is right or wrong.** When choices are made there are always consequences for our actions even though it may be a mixture of positive, negative or a mix of both. The net impact promotes a path toward more right than wrong more often. (Editor in Chief, 2019)
5. **This process is one that is very easy to use.** Due to the simplicity of the utilitarian model in its approach to seeking the greatest good for the greatest number of people. (Editor in Chief, 2019)
6. **Utilitarianism works with our natural intuition.** People are naturally good and often, don't seek to harm others partially because harming others will also harm us. Utilitarianism embraces this natural inclination toward good and seeks to create outcomes that align with our natural good nature. (Editor in Chief, 2019)
7. **It bases everything on the concept of happiness.** Although everyone's view of happiness is different, everyone wants it which makes utilitarianism easily acceptable. Given the natural intrinsic value promoted by utilitarianism, aiming to be happy through action creates a better outcome for everyone. (Editor in Chief, 2019)

While utilitarianism is a more highly viable ethical code than the other two, it is not without its disadvantages which editor in chief (2019) enumerates in this list of six disadvantages:

1. **Society does not solely focus on happiness when making choices.**
2. **The ends never really justify the means when considering happiness.**

- 3. Outcomes are unpredictable when dealing with the future.**
- 4. Happiness is something that is subjective.**
- 5. It forces you to rely on everyone else following the same moral code.**
- 6. Utilitarianism doesn't focus on the act itself to form judgments.**

In conclusion, no ethical system is 100 percent perfect. In the end, societies are the most prosperous and successful overall when there are clearly defined ethical principles that guide the behavior of its citizens. What's more, when actions are measured by careful consideration of the outcome of those actions, better outcomes over time are inevitable. Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of utilitarian ethical practice is the fact that it is driven by something that every member of society wants, no matter where their ethical compass points, happiness. This makes utilitarianism the most dominant ethical pursuit in the world