

# Utilitarianism

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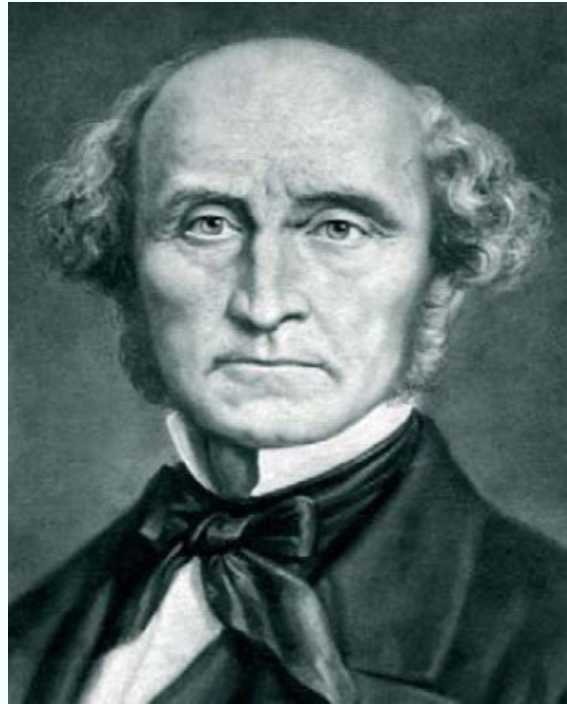
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**Many people have strong intuitions to the effect that it is only the consequences of an action that matter morally**

**Utilitarians, for example, believe that the only thing that matters morally is that we produce the Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number**

John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873 ) was an important Utilitarian)



**John Stuart Mill**  
[pub.uvm.dk/2008/democracycanon/images/figur27.jpg](http://pub.uvm.dk/2008/democracycanon/images/figur27.jpg)

# Here are some actions that might trigger these intuitions in you:

- **A patient with a terminal and painful illness desperately wants to die. His family are exhausted and beg their doctor to help him. The doctor gives him a dose of morphine intending it to kill him.**
- **A high ranking officer, knowing the enemy will attack a particular hotel, tells the hotel manager to close the hotel on the grounds of an outbreak of food poisoning. The manager does so.**
- **A father, knowing his unemployed son is depressed, forces him to work in the family business in order to regain his self-esteem**

**For the Utilitarian the end *does* justify the means**

**There is *no* action that cannot be performed so long as performing it would produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number**

## **This can lead to problems:**

- **surely genocide is wrong even if it *does* produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number?**
- **surely slavery is wrong even if it does lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number?**

**Some have said that Utilitarians...**

**...because they don't recognise any  
act as absolutely wrong...**

**...can't recognise rights**

**If so this seems to be a big problem for  
Utilitarianism**

**To cope with this sort of difficulty  
Utilitarianism broke into two camps:**

- The Act Utilitarians (AU)**
- The Rule Utilitarians (RU)**



**But some people believe the RU is  
incoherent because it collapses into AU**

**Imagine an RU in a situation in which he has three options:**

- **he can keep his rule**
- **he can break his rule**
- **he can modify his rule**

**Whatever he does he will either become a deontologist (or 'rule worshipper') or an AU.**

**This argument rests on the assumption that Utilitarianism is a very unsophisticated creed, recognising only:**

**a) one sort of rule**

**b) one sort of relationship to the rule**

**But human society is much more complicated than this:**

- **consider the difference between a legislator and a judge**
- **consider the difference between an act of fraud and an ordinary lie**

**To recognise such complications is to see that a Utilitarian can recognise both 'rules of thumb' and unbreakable rules.**

**Do you think this argument means  
Utilitarianism can overcome the objection  
that it cannot recognise rights?**

## **(Other) problems for Utilitarianism**

- ***Are there really no actions that are intrinsically wrong?***
- ***How do we know in advance what the consequences of our actions will be?***
- ***Must we always act to produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number?***
- ***What is happiness and how do we measure it?***
- ***Whose happiness must be counted?***
- ***Can a utilitarian account for personal integrity?***

**Marianne Talbot: Bioethics: An Introduction**  
(CUP, 2012) ISBN-10: 0521714591 and 13:  
978-0521714594 <http://amzn.to/HZQwbS>

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