

Consequential Theories

There's a trouble about theories: there's always a hole in them somewheres, if you look close enough. -- Mark Twain

J397

Media Ethics

Consequential Theories contend that the moral rightness of an action can be determined by looking at its consequences.

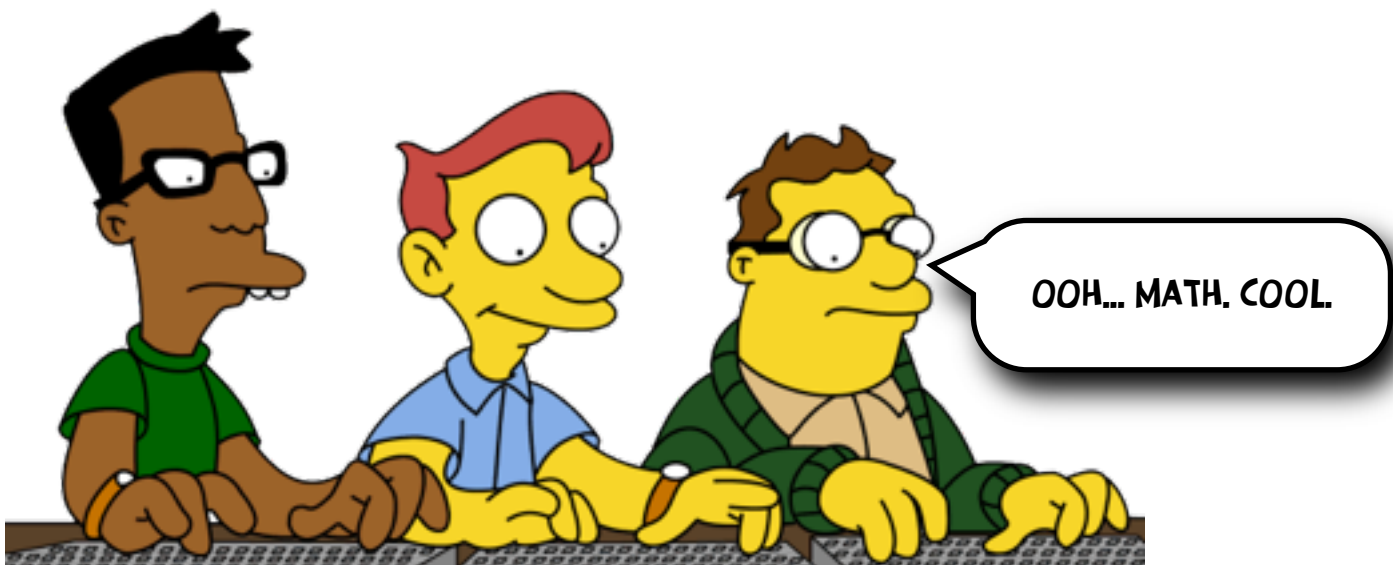
- If the consequences are good, the act is right.
- If the consequences are bad, the act is wrong.

What is right is determined by considering the ratio of good to evil that the action produces.

- The right act is the one that produces, or is intended to produce the greatest ratio of good to evil of any alternative.

There are 2 types of consequential theory

- Egoism and Utilitarianism
- Both rely on assessing the ratio of good to evil as an outcome of an action.





Utilitarianism is the philosophy underlying the modern welfare state. It was originally formulated by [Jeremy Bentham](#) in the 18th century, and fully developed by [John Stewart Mill](#) in the 19th.

U t i l i t a r i a n i s m

Asserts that we should always act so as to produce the greatest ratio of good to evil for everyone concerned with our decision.

Fundamental Imperative

Always act in the way that will produce the greatest overall amount of good in the world.

- The emphasis is clearly on consequences, not intentions.

Utilitarianism is a morally demanding position for two reasons:

- It always asks us to do the most, to maximize utility, not to do the minimum.
- It asks us to set aside personal interest.

The Utilitarian Calculus

Under Bentham, math and ethics finally merge: all consequences must be measured and weighed.

What do we calculate?

Pleasure may be defined in terms of: Happiness, Ideals, and Preferences

For any given action, we must calculate:

- How many people will be affected, negatively as well as positively

- How intensely they will be affected
- Similar calculations for all available alternatives
- Then choose the action that produces the greatest overall amount of utility

2 questions arise regarding calculation

Can everything be quantified?

- Some would maintain that some of the most important things in life (love, family, etc.) cannot easily be quantified, while other things (productivity, material goods) may get emphasized precisely because they are quantifiable.
- The danger: if it can't be counted, it doesn't count.

How much can we quantify?

- Are quantified goods necessarily commensurable?
- Are a fine dinner and a good night's sleep commensurable? Can one be traded or substituted for the other?

Act and Rule Utilitarianism

Act utilitarianism

Looks at the consequences of each individual act and calculate utility each time the act is performed.

Rule utilitarianism

Looks at the consequences of having everyone follow a particular rule and calculates the overall utility of accepting or rejecting the rule.

Rule utilitarians claim:

- In particular cases, act utilitarianism can justify disobeying important moral rules and violating individual rights.
- Act utilitarianism also takes too much time to calculate in each and every case.

Act utilitarians claim:

- Following a rule in a particular case when the overall utility demands that we violate the rule is just rule-worship. If the consequences demand it, we should violate the rule.
- Furthermore, act utilitarians can follow rules-of-thumb (accumulated wisdom based on consequences in the past) most of the time and engage in individual calculation only when there is some pressing reason for doing so.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Weaknesses of Utilitarianism are of several types:

- Both act and rule utilitarianism ignore actions that appear to be wrong in themselves
- The principle of utility may come into conflict with that of justice

Blatant Wrongs

- Both act and rule utilitarianism ignore actions that appear to be wrong in themselves
- Lying or even murder could theoretically be allowed if the action furthered the greater good.
- This allows, for instance, capital punishment and war.

Justice

- The principle of utility may come into conflict with that of justice
- Serving only the greater good can result in a deserving minority not being served—what Alexis de

Toqueville called “the tyranny of the majority.”

- Affirmative Action laws are an example of an attempt to correct such a problem in this country.

Responsibility

- Utilitarianism suggests that we are responsible for all the consequences of our choices.
- The problem is that sometimes we simply can't see far enough into the future to predict all the possible consequences of our actions. Nor can we foresee consequences of other people's actions that are taken in response to our own acts.

Integrity

- Utilitarianism often demands that we put aside self-interest. Sometimes this means putting aside our own moral conviction, which could result in damaging our own sense of integrity.

Intentions

- Utilitarianism is concerned almost exclusively about consequences, not intentions.
- This rules out the notion of good character or duty entirely.

Moral Luck

- By concentrating exclusively on consequences, utilitarianism makes the moral worth of our actions a matter of luck. We must await the final consequences before we find out if our action was good or bad.
- This seems to make the moral life a matter of chance, which runs counter to our basic moral intuitions.
- We can imagine actions with good intentions that have unforeseeable and unintended bad consequences
- We can also imagine actions with bad intentions that have unforeseeable and unintended good consequences.



Well intentioned actions can have unintended consequences.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Who does the calculating?

- Typically, the count differs depending on who does the counting
- Historically, this was an issue for the British in India. The British felt they wanted to do what was best for India, but that they were the ones best able to judge what that was.

Who is included?

When we consider the issue of consequences, we must ask who is included within that circle.

- Those in our own group (group egoism)?
- Those in our own country (nationalism)?
- Those who share our skin color (racism)?
- All human beings (humanism or speciesism)?
- All sentient beings?

Classical utilitarianism has often claimed that we should acknowledge the pain and suffering of animals and not restrict the calculus just to human beings.

These potential problems were not lost on John Stuart Mill who, in his treatise on utilitarianism, tried to deal with some of them.

Mill admits that certain examples of justice and injustice merit a higher consideration than the mere meting out of pleasure. For example, he agrees that we:

- Should not deprive anyone of his or her personal liberty, property, or any other thing that belongs to him

or her by law. In other words, do not violate a person's legal rights.

- Should not take or withhold from anyone that to which they have a moral right.
 - ▶ This is especially important if a bad law has resulted in someone either being deprived of their rights or having been given rights they do not deserve.
 - ▶ The fact that these rights are conferred by law makes them legal rights;
 - ▶ however, the fact that the law may have deprived someone of rights that they deserve makes those rights (prohibited by the law) moral rights.
 - ▶ Think of the segregation laws prior to the 1960s.

Mill admits that certain examples of justice and injustice merit a higher consideration than the mere meting out of pleasure. For example, he agrees that we:

- Should give to those who are deserving, and withhold from those who are not deserving (the notion of distributive justice).
- Should keep promises that we have entered into voluntarily.
- Should not show partiality in circumstances in which impartiality is considered appropriate.

Strengths in Utilitarianism

- It provides a basis for formulating and testing policies.
- It provides an objective way of resolving conflicts of self-interest.

- It recognizes the four primary claimant groups: clients/customers, organization, profession, society.

Concluding Assessment

Utilitarianism is most appropriate for policy decisions, as long as a strong notion of fundamental human rights guarantees that it will not violate rights of small minorities.

When using utilitarianism, try the following exercise:

- Ask yourself which of the alternatives you're exploring will generate the greatest benefit (or the least amount of harm) for the greatest number of people?
- However, keep in mind that the precepts of justice require that you consider the merit of those who are affected by the consequences of your action.

