Utilitarianism is generally thought of as a moral theory which can best be summed up by the phrase: 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. However, in terms of its linguistic origins it may be more aptly described as a 'theory of usefulness', after the Latin root word *utilis* meaning useful. This, then, seems to imply that whatever is useful is moral. On a literal interpretation, therefore, my garden spade and fork are moral implements because they are useful. But clearly this is absurd. However, decisions and actions may be characterised as morally useful. Immoral decisions lead to useless or bad actions and amoral decisions are those which lead to no actions at all.

So, for example, the act of abortion is, in itself, neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral. However, it becomes so when we consider to what end the procedure of abortion is being used. If abortion is being used to save the mother's life and restrict an already large family in a household where the husband is unemployed, and if the abortion is conducted in a humane fashion, then its use may, on utilitarian grounds, be justified, and the act itself becomes a moral one. The greatest happiness of the greatest number, that is, of the family unit, counts over and above the future possible happiness of the single unborn child. If, however, abortion is being used by a young married woman because the pregnancy may interfere with a planned skiing trip, then clearly it is difficult to see how it could be justified, unless a cynical vision of utilitarianism were to be employed in which the maximisation of immediate happiness for the young woman and her skiing party were to count for more than the future possible happiness of the unborn child and the future long-term happiness of the prospective family. To use Singer's Practical Ethics (1993) argument a minor interest (the pleasure derived from the skiing trip) is placed above a major interest (the life of the child and the future possibilities of family life). Hence, we may justifiably conclude that, in this instance, abortion becomes 'immoral'.

As we have already maintained, utilitarianism has come to be largely associated with the 'greatest good or the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. Its links with majority rule in democratic politics is obvious. Here, it is assumed to be morally acceptable for there to be government by the majority without the consent of the minority. Unfortunately, all too often, particularly given the voting procedures in the democratic nations of the world, there is government by the minority without the consent of the majority!

It was David Hume (1711-76) the Scottish philosopher who first introduced the concept of utility into ethics but he is not regarded as a utilitarian. Similarly, the phrase 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' was first coined by Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) in a work entitled An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue, although again Hutcheson is not considered to be a utilitarian in the strict sense.

**Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)**

The theory of utilitarianism was first fully articulated by Jeremy Bentham who not only wrote about ethics but about politics as well, his most famous work being A Fragment on Government. Because of his interests in both ethics and politics coupled with his desire to improve the social conditions of the masses he founded a movement known as The Philosophical Radicals. Arguably many of the reforms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly those to do with the treatment of criminals, were the result of Bentham's efforts. Shy but extremely able, Bentham apparently began studying Latin at the age of three and received his degree when only fifteen. However, his friend and follower, James Mill (1773-1836) fathered an even greater child prodigy, John Stuart Mill (1806-73). By all accounts John Stuart Mill began with Greek at the age of three, followed quickly with other languages by the age of eight and finally completed a rigorous classical education
by the time he was fourteen. By this time he had become much influenced by Benthamite thinking as his father had been before him.

For Bentham, that which is good is that which equals the greatest sum of pleasure and the least sum of pain. Hence, a right moral decision followed by a truly ethical action would be one which produced the greatest pleasure. The way in which this was to be measured was through the application of the utility calculus, sometimes referred to as the hedonic calculus. Hedone is the Greek word for pleasure. Hence, Bentham's version of the theory is occasionally called hedonic utilitarianism.

**The hedonic or utility calculus**

The utility calculus was supposed to measure the amounts of pleasure and pain according to seven criteria:

- intensity
- duration
- certainty
- extent
- remoteness
- richness
- purity.

The following example may help. Suppose you are a doctor driving to one of your patients, a young mother about to give birth. However, she is in great pain and difficulty and it looks as though she will need a Caesarian section. It is late at night and you come across a car accident down a country road. Two cars are involved and both drivers are injured and unconscious. You discover through trying to establish identities that one of them is the young pregnant woman's husband. The other is an elderly man. You don't quite know the extent of any internal injuries and are of the opinion that without immediate medical help one of them if not both may die. You are faced now with the moral decision of who to help first:

- the young mother about to give birth?
- the young woman's husband?
- the elderly gentleman?

Any one of them may die if you do not attend to them immediately. Leaving aside what we may actually feel or believe, the application of the utility calculus may go something like this:

- Attending to the young expectant mother first is the primary concern of the doctor. The death of both mother and child is almost a certainty if he does not act now, whereas the deaths of either of the two men are not certain. Moreover, the intensity of her pain is clearly greater at present than theirs. There is a greater richness and purity in saving the life of a young child who has, in all probability, a long and happy life ahead. Therefore, the duration and extent of the pleasures experienced by two people, the mother and child, is a clear likelihood.
- Attending to the young husband is the next priority. The pleasure of a new family, its intensity, duration, extent, richness and purity are all clear probabilities. If the doctor had attended to him first and neglected his expectant wife, she would probably have died, and the intensity, duration, extent etc. of the pain experienced by the widowed husband is likely to outstrip any pleasure to be gained from continued life without his loved ones.
• Attending to the elderly gentleman is the last priority. The duration and certainty of his future pleasure is under question owing to his age. He has all but lived his life; this is sometimes known as the 'good innings argument'. According to this line, the value of his life is not now as great as the young married couple's who have much of their lives ahead of them, nor of the young child who has yet to go in to bat, as it were.

**Some problems:**

One of the problems of Bentham’s theory and his hedonic calculus was that its results were based on a *quantitative measure*. That is, how much sheer quantity of pleasure can be gained from an action. Just by attending to one patient, the young mother, the decision has all but guaranteed that two people will be saved, and that the likely number of years in which they may experience pleasure is probably going to be a lot greater than the number of pleasurable years spent by the elderly gentleman. Moreover, the certainty of saving either the husband or the elderly gentleman is by no means guaranteed, whereas the death of the young mother and her child is almost guaranteed. So, although it may be a difficult decision, the doctor on strict utilitarian grounds would have to save the young mother and child because the quantity of pleasure is the important issue. But, can the quantity of pleasure actually be measured in numbers of years? Furthermore, who will do the measuring?

The second problem is that utilitarianism relies strictly on *its predictive value*. But who can predict that the child will grow up to be happy and productive, that the old man will soon die anyway, and that the sum total of pleasure to be gained by the young family is going to be greater than the old man’s? The child may grow up to be a mass-murderer, the family may then lead a collective life of guilt and misery, and the old man may, like Bertrand Russell, have been destined to make his major mark on political life in his eighties and nineties.

The third problem is to do with what counts as pleasure. Pure emotional and bodily pleasures are clearly quantifiable. But is it just pleasure that we wish to seek or increase and pain that we wish to avoid or minimise? I might be prepared to suffer a great deal of pain in order to gain a minimal amount of pleasure. The quick extraction of a painful tooth might, on the quantity of pleasure theory, be preferable to hours of painful dentistry involving excavating, filling and polishing the tooth, whilst simultaneously suffering the continuing pain of the tooth itself, all in order to satisfy some intangible desire to retain all my teeth. Or, supposing I wanted the pleasure of being thought slim, I could, like many summing fanatics, put myself through continual painful exercises and diets in order to wear jeans one size smaller. Or, more importantly, I could forgo all obvious pleasures of die moment, practise continuously on die piano in order to lead a precarious existence as a second-rate concert pianist combined with the dubious pleasure of fame.

**John Stuart Mill (1806-73)**

John Stuart Mill understood the problems only too well. Mill wanted, therefore, to define pleasure a little more carefully, and this involved shifting the emphasis from quantity to quality. Mill distinguished between the *higher* pleasures, associated with the mind, and the *lower* pleasures, associated with the body. Clearly the two are linked. It is difficult to experience the pleasures of intellectual pursuits whilst remaining perpetually cold and hungry. But after the minimum requirements of the body have been satisfied, that is, after the lower pleasures have been attended to, then the real moral business involves pursuit of the higher goods: mental, cultural and spiritual. Arguably, on this view, the person who eats and drinks in moderation in order to spend more time designing elegant, ecologically-sound and inexpensive clothing is morally better than the person who is anxious to toss off quick, profit-making designs in order that he may then pursue the known bodily pleasures
of sex, food and drink in large quantities. The higher pleasures of the mind are to be preferred to the lower pleasures of the body. As Mill states: 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.' (J. S. Mill, Utilitarianism, ed. by M. Warnock, 1962, Collins, p. 260).

Some criticisms:

There are still a number of problems associated with this view. Firstly, as Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) pointed out, how in practice do we distinguish properly between higher and lower pleasures, and how do we distinguish one higher pleasure from another? If all cultural and spiritual activities provide the same sum of pleasure and happiness, presumably it does not matter which one we choose to undertake at any time. If reading Shakespeare, playing Bach, and painting watercolours all produce the same degree of pleasure, then there is nothing to choose between them. Sidgwick understood that life is just a shade more complex than that, for every activity and pursuit, whether physical or intellectual, is both quantitatively and qualitatively different. An hour's reading of Shakespeare is just not equivalent to an hour's playing of Bach, and so on. Moreover, where do physically and intellectually demanding pursuits such as sailing, play-acting and advanced kung-fu fit into the higher/lower pleasures distinction? Is the refined eating of a carefully planned foreign dish a higher pleasure, and the eating of a takeaway beef burger a lower pleasure? The difficulties are endless.

The second problem is perhaps even greater than the first. The philosopher W. D. Ross (1877-1971) pointed to the inherent difficulties of what we might call a 'single-factor' moral theory. We cannot simply rely upon a single principle of equation such as the greatest good or the greatest happiness or the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. Life's ethical dilemmas cannot be reduced to a prepackaged, predictive calculus which balances outcomes. We experience internal conflicts between what our reason tells us, what duties we feel we ought to perform, and the need, obviously, to bring about the greatest good. Suppose, for example, you and your young son were seated next to a brilliant young doctor who, through conversation, you learn is close to finding a cure for the AIDS virus. The bus suddenly is involved in an accident and catches fire. You have just enough time to save one person before you are engulfed in flames. Who do you save: your son or the doctor? Application of the simple greatest happiness principle would undoubtedly lead to you having to save the doctor because of the number of lives ultimately he would save. The strict dictates of reason would lead to the same conclusion. However, your personal duty coupled with the moral bond of affection which ties you to your son, plus an over-riding instinct, would lead you to save your son. The saving of one's son would, using the concept introduced by Ross, be a prima-facie duty, that is, the most important duty and therefore the one that should rightly be put first. People would probably regret on one level that you saved your son and not the doctor, but it is unlikely that anyone would assume that you should have acted differently, and that your first duty, in essence, would be to your son.

Act and rule utilitarianism

A distinction can be drawn between two versions of utilitarianism:

a) ACT UTILITARIANISM holds that utilitarian methods should first arrive at specific actions which are considered to be moral or immoral and from these general rules can be deduced.

b) RULE UTILITARIANISM holds that utilitarianism should first frame general principles or rules, and from these can be derived specific acts which are not permitted.

Act Utilitarianism therefore moves from specific cases to general principles whilst Rule Utilitarianism moves in the opposite direction. In the case of Act Utilitarianism, if certain actions are conducive to the general happiness then a general rule is framed to embody these. The rule cannot, however, force us to do an action
which is against the greatest happiness, as it is the actions which are the basis for the rule. Act Utilitarianism can, therefore, never justify actions we would consider to be unacceptable.

In the case of Rule Utilitarianism, the rule takes priority and does not allow exceptions — certain actions which we might intuitively regard as unacceptable could, in principle, be allowed under the general rule. Some advocates of a Rule Utilitarian approach would resist this, but the only ground for doing so would be an appeal to our intuition that certain things are right or wrong and by allowing this intuition to have priority over the general principle. The intuitions in practice have priority and this, the principle of utility cannot accommodate.

Another way of differentiating Act from Rule Utilitarianism is by reference to consequences. Bentham and Mill's theories are considered to be Act (sometimes referred to as 'Classical') Utilitarianism. Under this approach the individual morally right action is defined in terms of the consequences of the action and the individual's motives are irrelevant. Act Utilitarians are considered to be ideologists as they measure the goodness or badness of an action by reference to the ends towards which they are directed. This form of Utilitarianism is particularly vulnerable to the charge that actions which are held to be morally right go against what may, in a wider context, be regarded as just.

Rule Utilitarianism, by contrast, determines what is morally right by the consequences of following a particular rule. Rules have to be laid down which are based on Utilitarian principles and it is then morally right to obey these rules and morally wrong to disobey them. If everyone obeys a rule which maximises happiness (for instance respecting the property of others, or treating other people with consideration) then happiness will be maximised. Any action that runs counter to this rule will then be wrong even if this action, taken on its own, may maximise the happiness of a particular group. Under Rule Utilitarianism for formulating state and international law, the function of legislative bodies is to establish rules which foster the greatest happiness principle.

Rule Utilitarianism appears to be an attractive option as a basis for morality in spite of its difficulties particularly because it emphasises the equality of all and resists the interests of particular groups being given priority over others. In the international arena this may be an important lesson to learn — why, after all, should the happiness of those in the affluent and powerful West have greater priority than the happiness of the poorest millions of the world? Rule Utilitarianism would reject such inequalities.

Whether pleasure is really the highest to which human beings can aspire may well be questioned and much will depend on whether individuals consider there is more to human life than contentment.

Mill is right to recognise that true happiness may come as a byproduct of some other endeavour and in this case consideration may need to be given to the endeavours towards which human life should be directed. Is there really no difference between striving to be a good dancer, a good pilot, a good model-aircraft builder or a gentle, selfless and virtuous person? If the word 'virtuous' is held to have meaning apart from the greatest happiness principle, then utilitarianism as a theory of morality may well be a failure.
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do the problems of utilitarianism invalidate the theory as a whole? Give two examples in which the logical outcome of a utilitarian act may actually go against what some philosophers have called our moral sense or intuition.

2. How might it be possible to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures? How could the pleasures to be gained from playing Bach be measured against the pleasures to be gained from seeing a Shakespearian play? Give examples if you can.

3. Is it better to be intellectually aware of the world's imperfections and the sufferings of people and, hence, be unhappy or dissatisfied, or is it better to be blissfully ignorant of the world's troubles and, hence, be happy and content with life? In other words, is it better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied? Is, indeed, the latter a 'fool'?

4. Invent an example which emphasises the difference between an act utilitarian and a rule utilitarian and explain the implications.

5. Is government by the majority the best political option? (For Plato, in The Republic, it certainly was not the best option, for the majority were unlikely to know what was in the best interests for everyone, and were unlikely to have any real inkling of the concept of justice, p. 15).

6. Do the human sciences (moral, social, political, economic etc.) have any real 'predictive power'? Utilitarianism is partly predicated on the belief that they do.