Definition

Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory that evaluates actions based on their consequences. The central principle is to maximize overall happiness or utility, often summarized as "the greatest happiness for the greatest number."

Key Concepts

1. **Utility**: Refers to happiness, pleasure, or well-being, and the absence of pain or suffering.

2. **Consequentialism**: The morality of an action is determined solely by its outcomes.

3. **Hedonism**: Classical utilitarianism views pleasure as the highest good.

4. **Impartiality**: Everyone's happiness is equally important.

Major Theorists

1. **Jeremy Bentham**:

   - Developed *act utilitarianism*.

   - Proposed the **"felicific calculus"** to measure pleasure and pain based on factors like intensity, duration, certainty, etc.

2. **John Stuart Mill**:

   - Advocated *rule utilitarianism*.

   - Distinguished between higher (intellectual) and lower (bodily) pleasures, emphasizing quality over quantity.

Types of Utilitarianism

1. **Act Utilitarianism**: Evaluates each action based on whether it maximizes happiness.

2. **Rule Utilitarianism**: Focuses on general rules that, if followed, lead to the greatest good.

Strengths

1. Promotes general welfare.

2. Flexible and adaptable to different situations.

3. Focuses on consequences, making it practical in decision-making.

Criticisms

1. **Ignores justice**: Actions that maximize happiness might violate individual rights.

2. **Impractical**: Measuring and comparing happiness is subjective and complex.

3. **Demanding**: Requires constant evaluation of actions and consequences.

4. **Minority neglect**: Risks sacrificing the well-being of minorities for the majority.

Applications

Utilitarianism is applied in areas like public policy, healthcare, environmental ethics, and economics to weigh costs and benefits for societal welfare.