

## Abstract

Title: Applying Utilitarianism. The Problem of Practical Action-guidance.

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Author: Jonas Gren

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This dissertation addresses the question of whether act-utilitarianism (AU) can provide practical action-guidance. Traditionally, when approaching this question, utilitarians invoke the distinction between criteria of rightness and methods of decision-making. The utilitarian criterion of rightness states, roughly, that an action is right if and only if there is nothing else that the agent can do that has a better outcome. However, this criterion needs to be supplemented, it is said, with some description of a strategy that allows an agent to reach decisions that approximate the utilitarian idea – a method of decision-making. The main question in the essay is if any such method can indeed be justified on the basis of AU. I argue that the justification of a method of decision-making depends on the extent to which it has two different features: practicability and validity. Roughly a method of decision-making is practicable if an agent trying to adhere to the method will succeed in doing so. A method of decision-making is valid if adhering to the method makes the agent approximate the overall goal of AU. I then proceed by examining whether it is possible to justify a belief to the effect that any of the various candidates of methods of decision-making that have been proposed in the literature have these features. My main conclusion is negative. No proposed method of decision-making can be shown to satisfy these desiderata to a sufficient degree. In the final chapter the implications of this conclusion are examined. Does this mean that we cannot justify a belief in AU? Does it mean that AU is false? My conclusion is that whether or not this shows that AU is false depends on what meta-ethical view is the most plausible one. I also present a tentative way of justifying a belief in AU.

**Keywords:** act-utilitarianism, action-guidance, maximising expected utility, criterion of rightness, methods of decision-making, practicability, validity, secondary rules of conduct, justification.