How the criticisms of Utilitarianism underline a fundamental error in our approach to ethical discourse

Utilitarianism as a normative ethical theory is attacked in a number of different ways, however I hope to show how these criticisms demonstrate a fundamental mistake in the way in which we go about breaking down an ethical theory.

The first criticism which is often asserted is the impracticality of Utilitarianism when it comes to decision making in our daily lives. Even if we accept the idea that we must act in the way that best tends to produce happiness it is impossible to know which actions will cause this. We cannot predict the vast and unforeseeable consequences of our actions and hence Utilitarianism seemingly fails as we cannot effectively and accurately fulfil the task of promoting happiness in the real world. Mill strives to object to this in his book 'Utilitarianism' writing 'that there has been ample time, namely, the whole past duration of the human species.' His point here is that humans know basically which actions tend to produce more happiness as a result of the cultivated experience of humanity and the general attitudes that we have formed over time to specific actions due to such experience. Therefore, we know which actions to undertake to produce overall greater happiness. However, one must question whether Mill is even obligated to respond to the challenge of impracticality. The truth of the principle of utility and the very ethical theory itself is unaffected and detached from the question of whether it can be usefully applied in the real world. If it is true to seek the happiness of the greatest number, then this remains the case whether or not we able to do so. Hence, we see that when discussing the validity of normative ethical theories, the issue of practicality is unimportant as it has no bearing on the actual truth of the theory. The question of practicality is however not useless but rather misplaced. It should come later once a base ethical theory has been established and we look to how it can be applied.

Another popular yet erroneous approach is to argue from the starting point of a known ethical truth to try and establish or dismiss an ethical theory. To say for example, that murder is always wrong, and then to identify a specific case where Utilitarianism justifies murder is not necessarily a valid argument that Utilitarianism fails as an ethical theory because it appears to justify a wrong action. Whilst this argument may seem logical at first it presupposes that murder, or another action is simply inherently wrong. This is to fall into the fallacy of question begging as it assumes that Utilitarianism is incorrect and that some actions must have inherent value to prove that Utilitarianism is in fact incorrect. This structure of reasoning is common and often used especially in the case of Utilitarianism, but it fails crucially in all cases because it cannot without using circular reasoning establish that any given action is wrong. This problem illustrates a common mistake in how we approach ethics in that we try and find a theory to cohere with our current values. This is problematic as our self-held beliefs cannot act as a firm groundwork for an ethical theory. Instead, we must build up an ethical theory from its very foundation and derive attitudes towards specific actions later.

The trolley problem and how it is discussed often shows our disposition to starting from judgements of specific actions and then working towards an ethical theory to match such assumptions. This is a common introductory thought experiment to the topic of ethics and is one where most start with an opinion on whether it can be right to pull the lever to kill one and save five and work backwards to an ethical position. However, this is foolish as the point of an ethical theory is not to justify our previously held beliefs and judgements but rather to provide a starting framework to build our ethical perspectives anew.

Whilst many of the criticisms of Utilitarianism fail, there is one which is very difficult to overcome and demonstrates the correct way to go about analysing an ethical theory. This criticism is that Utilitarianism fails to successfully establish happiness as having inherent value. Bentham falls victim to the naturalistic fallacy when trying to establish the value of pleasure. This is the fallacy outlined by David Hume that we cannot derive an ought from an is (in this case it is Bentham's argument that we naturally pursue pain and avoid pleasure and hence we ought to do so). In 'Introduction to the principle of morals, legislation' Bentham writes on pleasure and pain 'it is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do' showing how his assertion of the principle of utility is fallacious. Most however, accept the inherent value of happiness as a brute fact and do not seek to break down Bentham's starting assertion although this is exactly what must be done. We must adapt our philosophical approach to examine the foundational assertions of ethical theories and hence decide their merit rather than focusing on the practical application of the theory. This is the key point in the failure of our approach to ethics as it is the starting value assumptions (such as the value of happiness in Utilitarianism) of ethical theories that must be examined as these are the foundations of ethical theories and hence their success is entirely dependent on their truth.

In conclusion, as seen in the mishandled approach to the criticisms of Utilitarianism, we must adapt our approach to the analysis of ethics and shift our focus from the practicalities and repercussions of accepting normative ethical theories. Instead, we must judge their validity on the surety of their foundational claims as only then can we properly assess the truth of an ethical theory.