

## Utilitarianism

Consequentialism is a class of moral theories which basically hold that an action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favourable than unfavourable. This means that correct moral behaviour is solely determined by a kind of 'cost-benefit' analysis of consequence. That is a very general view, and individual consequentialist theories are more precisely formed than this vague principle. The three main divisions of theory are as follows :

ethical egoism, where an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favourable than unfavourable only to the agent performing the action; ethical altruism, where an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favourable than unfavourable to everyone except the agent; finally utilitarianism, where an action is morally right if the consequences of the action are more favourable than unfavourable to everyone. Though this is a brief summary of both ethical egoism and altruism, we are mainly concerned with utilitarianism here and the other forms of consequentialism shall rest at this point, apart from recognising that utilitarianism seems to hold the middle ground between these two theories. As fundamental flaws have been found in both egoism and altruism, it would be hoped that utilitarianism, as a compromise between the two, will make some sense of morality and action. Unfortunately this may not indeed be the case, as utilitarianism appears to have its own flaws.

The case for utilitarianism is stated by Mill in his Utilitarianism, and he gives the highest normative principle as 'actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.' He refers to this as the principle of utility, as did his predecessors Hume and Bentham. Many proponents of utilitarianism call upon human benevolence against the seeming hard-heartedness of those who reject it. They claim that the theory offers benefit to all, as the object is to promote happiness, with such an aim it seems that utilitarianism must be good for mankind. Smart speaks of act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism, and defines these as follows : 'act-utilitarianism is the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be judged by the consequences, good or bad, of the action itself. Rule-utilitarianism is the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be judged by the

goodness and badness of the consequences of a rule that everyone should perform the action in like circumstances.' Other commentators have noted that rule-utilitarianism can be incorporated into act-utilitarianism when the latter has been properly considered, and the differences between the two do not overtly affect utilitarian theory. Smart also notes the idea of negative utilitarianism, the theory that instead of maximising general happiness, one ought to minimise suffering. He suggests that this is interesting in that the theory can be seen as a 'subordinate rule of thumb', but otherwise it makes utilitarian theory unclear as it would be harder to see which ills to lessen than it would be merely to promote general happiness.

Utilitarianism is an attractive theory, mainly due to its promotion of happiness, to which no caring human would object. There are, however, a number of problems to be considered before a final judgement can be made, and the first of these concerns the definition of utilitarianism itself. The question of happiness has not escaped the notice of utilitarians, the definition above does not adequately explain what it is we ought to be striving for when we try to maximise human 'happiness'. Smart gives three positions, as represented by Bentham, Mill and Moore. Bentham follows the hedonistic theory that happiness is pleasure, and that the pleasures of all activities are more or less equal, while Mill believes that there are higher and lower pleasures, and Moore suggests that some things, such as academic research, have intrinsic value apart from pleasure. Smart is right in thinking that humans have an interest in intellectual as well as sensual pursuits, and a purely hedonistic view is surely too simplistic. Though it is true that humans enjoy pleasurable pursuits, this does not suggest that that is all humans wish for in their lives. Smart suggests that we were made 'for higher things', and that had it not been for our eagerness to pursue subjects on their intellectual merit alone, the human race would not be as it is today.

The concept of happiness is still not clear, however, as it must be shown to be different from enjoyment. The main difference must be that happiness is a long term concept, whereas enjoyment is momentary, but it is still hard to define what true happiness really is. This was the problem which King Croesus of Lydia presented to Solon, the legendary Athenian law-giver. Croesus expected that Solon when asked would name the king as the happiest man in

accordance with his immense wealth and good fortune, and was most disappointed when Solon did not name him as the most, or even the second most happy individual. In Solon's opinion Croesus had been lucky so far in his life, and the happiness of a man could only be judged when he is dead, 'until he is dead, keep the word 'happy' in reserve. Till then, he is not happy, but only lucky...look to the end, no matter what it is you are considering. Often enough God gives man a glimpse of happiness, and then utterly ruins him. ' Since it is so difficult to decide what happiness is, utilitarianism suffers the problem of only having a vague guiding force, we are told to maximise happiness, but we are unclear as to what this exactly means. As shown above, happiness means more than physical well-being or pleasure, so it is hard to know what to do for the best.

The reliance on analysis of consequence may also prove to be a handicap for the utilitarian. No one can predict the future, and it is not clear how much the utilitarian is expected to worry about consequences hereafter, or whether only the direct consequences of an agent's action are important. It is also unclear whether an agent can be responsible for a further agent's action who has been influenced by the first. Quite often in real life the consequences of an action cannot be seen, or the agent may have made a mistake leading to a disastrous final outcome. The utilitarian does not seem to allow for this eventuality. Also it is not clear whether one ought to consider whether an apparently benevolent action may adversely affect universal happiness - Smart gives the example of a man saving Hitler from drowning in 1938, obviously had he been left to die many of the atrocities of the twentieth century would not have been committed. It does not seem fair, however, to blame the heroic rescuer for not being able to see such future consequences of his action. This is why utilitarianism usually speaks of 'direct' consequences, but still this is not entirely convincing, as there are times when decisions must be made which affect more than the immediate future.

The most unacceptable facet of utilitarianism has always been the rigid insistence on the happiness of the majority over that of the minority. While in principle this does not seem to be such a terrible thing, when more closely examined utilitarianism in practice becomes impossible for many people to countenance. Examples have been given - 'Jim and the Indians' for instance

- which show that utilitarian principles may sometimes call upon an agent to commit horrific deeds in the name of benefit to the majority. Utilitarianism demands that, if faced with a situation where one must choose between personally murdering one man to free others or watching a group be killed, the utilitarian choice would be to kill one man. This is utterly untenable for the majority of people, though the example given may, in certain situations, be an option to be considered, but utilitarian principles go yet further. Utilitarianism is a theory concerned with consequence, but following this to its legitimate end, to maximise the general happiness, one ought to act now to prevent future disaster. There seems to be no problem with this, but after consideration this principle allows for the murder of the innocent now if that would be in the general majority interest in the future. This is utterly unacceptable for most, and refusal to act in such a way can only be answered by accusations of 'self-indulgence' from utilitarians.

Appeals to integrity do not seem to have much effect on utilitarians either, and the theory does not appear to follow generally held ideas of justice. Mill saw the concept of justice as the strongest attack on utilitarianism, and felt that if he could explain the concept of justice in terms of utility, then that would answer the main non-consequentialist argument against utilitarianism. He presents two arguments concerning justice, firstly that all moral elements in the notion of justice are dependent on social utility. He points out that the two main components of justice are punishment and the idea of rights violations, and so argues that punishment is composed of vengeance and social sympathy, and that rights are claims we have on society to protect us. In both cases Mill argues that such components reduce down to social utility. Mill's second argument suggests that as justice is rather ambiguous, then it cannot be as foundational as his opponents would contend. He points to the existence of dispute in matters of justice which can only be resolved with appeal to utility. Mill then concludes that though justice is a genuine concept, it must be based on utility. This is still not convincing enough in cases where the happiness of the majority depends on the extermination or maltreatment of a minority group. Most people would not regard such an action as just, but it is in accordance with utilitarian principle.

The insistence of utilitarianism that the happiness of the majority must be considered to

be the ultimate aim of action ignores the 'rights' of the minority, and indeed could be seen as denying them rights altogether. This way of behaving to minority groups is not generally accepted in our 'civilised' modern world, but this has not always been so, and even now, within living memory, theories of majority right over minority have resulted in mass murder, torture and oppression. As such actions are condemned by those who live in liberal societies, it is not clear who is right, or whether those who condemn can do so without fear of reprisal. Fear of punishment for one's views by the current regime has not always prevented people from speaking out in opposition to such practices though, so it would appear that, in general, actions which result in the suffering of the minority for the sake of the majority are not right by human instinct.

The necessity to adopt policies of extreme action for the greater good may seem to be something which would only happen on rare occasions, utilitarianism taken to its logical end would appear to be a dangerous principle to adopt, setting worrying precedent for the future. If utilitarianism is correct, then human instincts of equality and justice must be wrong, despite Mill's efforts to associate justice with utility. The theory, though immediately attractive, can be seen to have a number of flaws which apart from being problematic present mankind with situations which most would not accept as right, and in extreme cases would horrify most people. The accusation of utilitarians of 'hard-heartedness' does not ring true when it is considered that utilitarianism allows for atrocities to be committed with the only justification needed as the agent believes that it is for the promotion of majority happiness. Utilitarianism does not give adequate guidance in individual cases and tends towards a 'tyranny of the majority', failing to protect minorities. The whole concept of happiness is difficult to gauge, and as this is the only aim of the utilitarian, this must present terrible difficulties for the agent, leaving plenty of room for error. Lastly, the idea of utilitarianism as a universal principle is personally repellent, and as it has never been accepted by all, it can only be hoped that it never will be.

Smart in JJC Smart and B Williams Utilitarianism : For and Against (1973)  
Herodotus Historiae 1.32

Williams in JJC Smart and B Williams Utilitarianism : For and Against, and M Hollis' answer Jim and the

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