

Utilitarianism is the greatest good of the greatest number. It takes the view that an action is right if it is likely to produce the best consequences compared to all the other possible actions. The best consequences are those which involve the maximization of what is good and the minimization of what is bad. The worst consequences are which involve the maximization of what is bad and the minimization of what is good. The basic premise is the idea that the greatest good comes from creating happiness for the greatest number of people. Pleasure and freedom of pain are the only things desirable as ends. In Utilitarianism it is the greatest happiness of everyone involved which is right, so one must be impartial to one's own happiness.

Utilitarianism takes the view that if needed, you should sacrifice your own happiness for greater pleasure of others. For Utilitarianism bases action on pleasure and pain. It clearly takes pleasure to be desirable as it recommends producing greatest pleasure and minimal pain. If something is intrinsically good, it is good in itself no matter what its consequences are. If something is instrumentally good, it is good because of its consequences. A Utilitarian would say that pleasure and only pleasure is intrinsically good. For example they would argue that health is only good as it makes us feel good and it is that which causes us pleasure, whereas being unhealthy makes us feel bad.

There are a few minor problems with the application of the Utilitarian argument. First of all how can one measure happiness and decide which action would result in the greatest happiness for everyone involved? Then there is the question of scope. How far does someone look in deciding who is involved and who would be affected by the action?

Along with these problems, there are many arguments for and against Utilitarianism and whether it provides an adequate basis for making moral decisions.

An argument against Utilitarianism is that there is no agreement about what is the 'good' that is to be maximized for all concerned in different situations. Who decides what is good for whom? And whose interests are primary in these decisions? Furthermore does someone have authority over anyone else in making these decisions?

Also, a Utilitarian would not judge the rightness or wrongness of the actions but rather in the consequences or what has resulted from the actions. This means they take the view that it is okay, and therefore right, to carry out an action which is wrong in itself as long as it has good consequences for the majority of people. An example of how this could

be wrong is; in a society with a lot of rape and no rapists being convicted, the general public may be threatened and unhappy with the thought of a rapist being at large. Therefore, if a police detective was a Utilitarian, and under pressure to find the attacker, then he would feel it was right to convict an innocent man just to make the greater number of people feel safer and therefore happier. This also means a Utilitarian could not differentiate between an accidental death and a murder. Despite the actions or intentions being obviously different, the consequences or result, the person dying, are exactly the same. There is no question as to whether or not this example assists in, or provides an adequate basis for, making moral decisions, as it is morally wrong to convict someone who is completely innocent.

The deterrence theory, which is used by people opposing the Utilitarian argument, is where a Utilitarian would feel it is okay to punish innocent people to promote deterrence to other potential criminals. In the example of the society mentioned before, Utilitarianism takes the view that it would be good and an obligation of the detective's to convict an innocent man to scare off any other rapists. There is also the factor of autonomy, which means having control over one's life. In the case where a society strictly promotes the greatest amount of happiness, this would mean that

one would have no control over one's life. Surely the preservation of one's autonomy is more important than maximizing happiness.

There are other flaws of Utilitarianism such as, is one entitled to break promises if doing so would cause the maximum happiness. Also Utilitarianism as a principle does not consider the individual. It is collective and there are instances where individuals and individual interests should be valued more. Furthermore do Utilitarians then excuse killing if the person's life was miserable and full of pain and the person was beginning to become a burden on their family. For example, if someone was in hospital suffering a lot, a Utilitarian may think it good to kill the person, as it is not depriving them from anything that brought happiness, it is minimising the unhappiness suffered by the family and it is allowing someone else to receive the aid the person was getting. However it is still unjust and morally wrong to kill a person.

On the other hand, in support of Utilitarianism, Rule Utilitarianism is actually whether everyone in society followed certain rules and what the consequences would be, ie would everyone following the rules maximize happiness and minimize unhappiness. Therefore a particular action is seen as right according to whether it conforms to a justified moral rule. Also, in favour of Utilitarianism, a valuable corrective against anyone

who lives in a society with a very well defined set of laws. Furthermore 'the greatest number of good' can be an effective way of defeating prejudices and selfishness. There can also be a lot of circumstances where the right action is the one to have the best consequence. For example a father likes to play golf on Sunday but the circus is coming to town and his three children would be very happy if they could go. Therefore if the father were a Utilitarian he would realise that his three children's happiness is more than his individual happiness and he would take them to the circus, which is a good thing to do. Lastly, most of the things near-universally agreed to be good are things which make people happy, and most of the things near-universally agreed to be bad are things which make most people unhappy. Which is also the view that Utilitarians take – maximum happiness for the majority and minimum unhappiness for the majority.

In conclusion, Utilitarianism does provide an adequate basis for making moral decisions to an extent as it is good and morally right to promote as much happiness as possible and the greatest good for the greatest number is therefore right. However the principle of justice and individual rights are ignored in Utilitarianism especially where autonomy and deterrence are concerned, as the innocent should definitely not be punished.

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