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Thinking ethically: The utilitarianism approach in moral decision making

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Abstract

Many of us routinely employ moral reasoning when making daily judgments. When questioned about why we feel we have a moral responsibility to execute specific behaviors, we frequently cite the pleasure or the avoidance of pain. Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism, providing the most effective approach for determining ethically correct behavior in every given circumstance. In Jeremy Bentham's writings, he believed that the most promising method to achieving such an agreement was to choose the policy that would provide the most significant net benefits to society once the harms were considered. (1) The author will examine utilitarianism's definition, application, and issues in this work. (2) consequentialism, whose central tenet is that an act's ethical position depends on its consequences' value; (3) The difference between utilitarian rule and action. Both agree that actions should be judged based on their results, but the former interprets "actions" as classes of actions while the latter as particular actions. Moreover, (4) conclude the arguments against utilitarianism. It is asserted that utilitarianism cannot accommodate the magnitude of our commitments to others, the presence of moral and political rights, and the requirements of distributive justice. In a time that has been called by some the "time of self-interest," utilitarianism serves as a compelling reminder that morality demands us to look beyond the self for the sake of all.

Keywords: Consequentialism, ethics, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart mill, moral decision, utilitarianism

Introduction

Suppose the Armed Forces of the Philippines learn of a scheme to detonate a dirty bomb in Metro Manila. Soldiers apprehend a suspect who, they believe, knows the bomb's location. Is it permissible to harass the suspect into revealing the bomb's location? Can the dignity of an individual be violated to save a large number of lives?

If you concur, Probably, you applied utilitarianism in your moral reasoning. The utilitarian moral principle states that the ethically proper conduct in any given case is the one that generates the most outstanding level of benefits over harms for all involved parties. As long as a course of action promotes the benefits for all parties, utilitarianism is neutral to whether those gains are acquired through deception, manipulation, or force. Numerous individuals commonly employ this form of moral reasoning when making daily judgments. Whenever challenged about why we believe we have a moral responsibility to perform a particular action, we typically cite the good that will be accomplished or the harm that will be prevented. When choosing, for instance, whether to invest in a particular public project, whether to authorize a new drug, or ban a specific pesticide, business analysts, legislators, and scientists routinely examine the benefits and downsides of policies.

Utilitarianism gives a straightforward method for finding the ethically proper course of action in any given situation. We must first recognize the available options to determine what action to take in any given circumstance. Second, we consider the anticipated benefits and drawbacks of each possible way to proceed for everyone affected by the activity. Thirdly, we select the course of action that provides the maximum benefits once all costs are accounted for.

The utilitarian approach contributes back to the thoughts of Jeremy Bentham, an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English philosopher. Bentham, a law reformer, sought an objective criterion for deciding the types of legislation England should enact. After weighing the evils, he believed that the most promising strategy for attaining such an agreement was selecting the policy that would bring enormous net benefits to society. His motto, which is now well-known, was "the greatest good for the greatest number." The utilitarian principle has been expanded and adapted over time, resulting in many versions today. Bentham, for example, defined benefits and drawbacks in terms of pleasure and suffering. John Stuart Mill, a prominent 19th-century utilitarian, characterized the advantages and disadvantages of pleasure and pain and the quality or degree of such pleasure and pain. In modern times, utilitarians usually express benefits and harms regarding the satisfaction of individual preferences or monetary gains over monetary costs. There are also diverse utilitarian opinions based on the type of inquiry we should ask ourselves before making an ethical decision. Some utilitarians say that before making a moral choice, we must ask, "What effect will my performing this act in this circumstance have on the overall balance of good and evil?" If telling a falsehood will produce the best results in a given situation, we should do it. Others, known as rule utilitarians, say that we must choose the conduct that adheres to the general principle with the most favorable results. In other words, we must question, "What effect would everyone taking this action have on the overall balance between good and evil?" So, for example, the rule "always speak the truth" typically promotes the good of all and should be adhered to at all times, even if, in a particular situation, telling a lie would produce the best results. Despite these differences, most utilitarians hold that morality must be based on assessing our acts' good and negative consequences.

Utilitarianism as Consequentialism

The core concept of utilitarianism, a form of consequentialism, is that the ethical status of an act is judged by its consequences. This definition of consequentialism is insufficient. It must be highlighted that only the consequences decide if an action is ethical or incorrect and that a reference to both positive and negative outcomes is crucial. Suitable activities have positive results, while the wrong activities have adverse consequences. When we use the repercussions of action as a justification for approving or criticizing it, we are pointing toward something objective, 'out there,' and independent of any one person's emotions. Consequently, our judgment is reasonable and objective, rather than relying on subjective "inner sentiments" that vary from person to person. Therefore, the only plausible alternative to consequentialism is a swamp of subjectivism and irrationality (Stubbs 1981, 503) ^[2].

The consequentialist proposes that a single standard, such as the utilitarian principle, be applied in all circumstances where an agent or observer must make a moral judgment. Even when secondary measures are permitted, this criterion will be the ultimate basis for every moral judgment or decision (Ibid., 510). Consequentialism in general, and utilitarianism in particular, provides us with a mechanism to justify our approval or disapproval of actions; it provides a legal judgment independent of subjective feelings (Ibid., 503). The utilitarian approach maintains that an effort is correct if the good that arises from it is higher than the good resulting from

other behaviors (Swinyard and DeLong 1990, 20) ^[3].

Utilitarianism cannot be the sole guiding concept for our moral actions if justice issues are considered. However, it can impact these choices. The utilitarian principle necessitates considering both immediate and long-term consequences of our actions. Given its emphasis on summing the advantages and disadvantages of all people, utilitarianism demands us to evaluate objectively the interests of all those whose lives are influenced by our actions.

There are problems with depending entirely on utilitarianism to make moral decisions, even though utilitarianism is a popular ethical theory. First, the utilitarian analysis includes assigning values to the advantages and disadvantages of our actions and comparing them to the advantages and disadvantages that could result from other behaviors. Nonetheless, it is frequently difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate and compare the value of certain benefits and costs. How can we quantify the worth of life and art? How do we compare money's worth to, say, the value of human life, the value of time, or the value of human dignity? Moreover, can we ever know all of the outcomes of our actions with absolute certainty? Our ability to evaluate and foresee the advantages and costs of a course of action or moral guideline is, to say the least, questionable.

Perhaps the most troubling characteristic of utilitarianism is its contempt for conceptions of fairness. We might think of scenarios where a specific procedure would greatly benefit society but would be unjust. Perhaps the most troublesome part of utilitarianism is that it neglects concepts of fairness. We might think of scenarios where a specific course of action would generate significant advantages for humanity but would be unjust. They predicted that allowing the black population of South Africa to run the government would lead to civil strife, economic collapse, hunger, and unrest. If this prediction had been accurate, which the end of apartheid proves it was not, then utilitarianism would have morally justified the unfairness of the white South African government.

Rule and Act Utilitarianism

The difference between utilitarian rule and act. Both parties concur that actions should be judged according to their results. The former defines 'activities' as types of actions, whereas the latter reads it as specific actions. For a rule utilitarian, it is typically not permitted to appeal to the consequences of specific actions when making moral decisions or judgments; instead, the appeal must be made to rules that command or prohibit all activities of a given type. These rules require a consequentialist justification; there are a rule prohibiting (or requiring) acts of type X because actions of that kind typically have negative (or positive) outcomes.

Rule utilitarianism was initially presented as an improvement over act utilitarianism, in that, despite being essentially consequentialist, it retains the advantages of absolutism and so addresses the common complaints against consequentialism from this standpoint. The assumption that absolute objections can be addressed in this manner is based on a misunderstanding of conclusive philosophical objections. The anticipated objection is as follows: if we had been consequentialists, we would sometimes be committed to morally unacceptable courses of action (such as murdering the innocent) because it is impossible to maintain a priori that there are never occasions in which such an action would have

sound effects than any possible alternatives. Thus, the acceptance of consequentialism would result in morally objectionable outcomes. The rule utilitarian attempts to rebut this point by stating that his brand of consequentialism permits and even necessitates a law prohibiting such activities due to their generally adverse outcomes. Indeed, rule utilitarians will often go to extreme lengths of implausibility in order to demonstrate that, contrary to appearances, consequentialism does not authorize morally objectionable actions.

Consequentialists say most plainly and repeatedly that consequentialism is rationally and, by extension, objectively better than absolutism. At its strongest, the argument is that only consequentialism offers a rational method of moral appraisal; one only logically considers a moral question if one asks, "What are the consequences of acting in this way?"

John Stuart Mill once wrote

The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not...(one's) own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.

Since Mill's utilitarianism, people have argued that in certain circumstances, it is preferable to act in a manner that results in a less desirable overall end.

Difficulties in Utilitarianism

Moral objections are the most frequent opposition to utilitarianism. It is argued that utilitarianism cannot accept the scope of our obligations to others, the presence of moral and political rights, and the requirements of distributive justice (Brink 1986, 417-418) ^[1].

Nonetheless, this idea contains some flaws. Justice is the major shortcoming of utilitarianism. A common argument for utilitarianism is that it may require us to violate justice principles. For instance, suppose you are a judge in a small village. Someone has committed a crime, and as a result, there have been injuries, physical confrontations, and some rioting. You, as the judge, are aware that if you sentence an innocent guy to death, the town will quiet down, and peace will be restored. If you turn him free, there will be even more turmoil and significant damage to the city and its inhabitants. It appears that utilitarianism necessitates punishing the innocent in situations such as these.

Punishing an innocent person is unethical since it violates his rights and is unjust. Nevertheless, for utilitarians, the only thing that matters is the net increase in happiness. If the majority's happiness is sufficiently increased, it may be justified to make one (or a few) miserable for the majority's benefit. In certain situations, utilitarianism implies unjust actions; consequently, it is fundamentally flawed. Regardless of the potential benefits, specific actions should never be performed.

Utilitarian moral thinking dominates our political and moral discourse. Consequences have a role and must be considered, but other ethical principles, human rights, practical virtues, and our judgments and choices must also be weighed. However, consequences are not the only thing that matters. There is more to morality than the results of our acts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, utilitarianism offers a straightforward method for finding the ethically proper action to perform in each given situation. We must first recognize the available options to select what action to take in any given condition. Second, we identify the anticipated benefits and drawbacks of each plan of events for everyone affected by the activity. Thirdly, we select the course of action that provides the maximum benefits once all costs are accounted for. Nevertheless, despite the straightforward nature of this method, it is not problem-free. First, the utilitarian analysis includes assigning values to the advantages and disadvantages of our actions and comparing them to the advantages and disadvantages that could result from other behaviors.

Nonetheless, it is frequently difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate and compare the value of specific benefits and costs. How can we quantify the worth of life and art? How do we compare the price of money to, say, the worth of human life, the value of time, or the cost of human dignity? Furthermore, can we ever know with complete certainty the results of all of our actions? Our capacity to evaluate and anticipate the benefits and drawbacks of a course of action or moral principle is, to say the least, lacking.

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