

## UTILITARIANISM

### the greatest happiness of the greatest number philosophy

This essay is for examining the Utilitarian hypothesis that the right is whatever makes the most people the most happy. The action does not matter but only the consequences. The theory is against rigid rules and demands that you do what seems to advance happiness. Rules when deployed are only valid as long as they keep most people happiest. In its favour, moral situations need a decision and the decision is hard to make for there are too many moving parts and if you keep track of them now you will be in trouble keeping track in five minutes time!

Any ethic that claims that we must approach right and wrong by weighing up the consequences instead of just going by rules is called consequentialist. People fear being controlled by rule makers. Consequentialism, of which Utilitarianism is an example, therefore automatically produces some happiness at least.

The argument that consequentialism is wrong for the results of every action go out of control at some stage is incorrect and myopic. The fact of the matter is some good has come out of the things we do for the sake of consequences. Just because we may get it wrong does not mean we must stop trying to get it right.

The Utilitarian theory is wildly popular for it is easily confused with systems of ethics that weigh one action against another and advocate the one that does the least damage.

An ethic that says morality is about happiness directly or indirectly rings true. Even moralities that say life is valuable and more important than quality of life encourage and advocate happiness when possible.

Is Utilitarianism a sensible and acceptable ethic?

## USELESS-ITARIANISM

The principle of the Utilitarian theory is that happiness is the most precious thing. If persons should be happy and happiness comes first then the theory is incoherent. Why? If persons should be happy then persons must be more important than happiness. The theory is wrong.

Utilitarianism would command slavery or murder or unjust imprisonment if the fruit was great happiness. These are things that deny the value of the person. If persons don't matter then why should their happiness matter?

The fact that Utilitarians may never do that only means they never had to. It is not grounds for praise. Religion readily says that and it is right but that means we can say the same thing about it - it teaches doctrines that would harm and which are to be abhorred even if they never get into a position where they do a lot of damage.

Utilitarianism enables people to be used to the back teeth by those who pretend that this evil and that will make them happiest and can only lead to universal insecurity. Any theory about consequences will do that but the greatest happiness theory is too flexible and has more hazards than they do have and could have.

The Utilitarian cannot judge anybody for anybody could state that their seemingly bad action was done in good faith. And Utilitarianism demands that this lie be told for the lie makes the person happier and others happier. Utilitarianism is a recipe for anarchy in the lowest sense of the word. How can you send a thief or a murderer to jail when you endorse a theory that means they might have made a mistake rather than have done a wilful evil?

You could commit a crime and then make it look like you did the best thing under the circumstances later. Utilitarianism forbids you to judge. If you cannot put people into jail without proving their guilt you cannot advance happiness. You don't know if jailing them maximises happiness.

When you give a person money and it makes you happy to do so you may feel that you have done right because that person is happier than you. But you will never know if you would have been the happiest if you kept the money. So Utilitarianism may be true but it cannot be put into practice. We have to find a theory that is workable. Utilitarianism certainly is not.

When people do wrong and tend to do wrong the Utilitarian cannot do what he or she regards as a good work because he or she cannot tell how the target will react or what it will inspire her or him to do. Watching TV is a sin in Utilitarianism because you could be doing better. So this gives some idea about how much offending against the philosophy occurs. And it's very demanding too. A demanding morality is hardly a recipe for happiness.

Nietzsche thought that it is insane to invent a demanding altruistic morality such as Utilitarianism and then defeat it by telling people to try and be one of those for whom it is true “that the greatest happiness for the greatest number”. A morality that calls people to sacrifice for selfish reasons will backfire and becomes about the pay-off not the people.

If you accept that happiness is what matters then since you can only really know yourself and are more certain that you exist than you are that others exist, it follows that you should do whatever you like as long as it gives you pleasure even if it makes dirt of other people as long as you have some friends. Lots of happy people are happy because they have some friends and they don't care that everybody else hates them. The principle Utilitarianism is erected on is not the right foundation for it at all so the theory is incoherent.

Utilitarianism is a philosophy for those who maintain that what people do not know will not hurt them and is therefore right. How could it forbid the murder of an obnoxious person always when there are times you could secretly commit it and distress nobody?

People will never agree on what will increase happiness in relation to the more important issues facing society. That will ensure that the theory will lead only to discord and resentment and arguments. Most people don't have the time to look at something from every angle. There will always be the fear that something has been missed.

The solution that mental or intellectual pleasures like wisdom are more important than physical ones which are more fleeting and hard to maintain helps but not completely. Some complain that it is elitist for it implies you have to be smart to be moral. But the attempted solution would only be saying you should find your joy in wisdom as far as you see it and can see it. So it is not elitist. Another complaint is that you still can't calculate what will bring the most happiness. But this problem is reduced. It is certain then that the most real and most practical Utilitarianism will promote mental pleasures principally. This is the Utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill. But we are back where we started for the stupid person still does what he or she sees as wisdom or hopes is wisdom.

Reducing the most suffering would count more than making the most happiest.

All forms of Utilitarianism claim to be based on reason. They say it is reasonable to abandon reason if that is what makes most people happiest. So it is not reasonable after all! Happiness is not more important than reason. It is better to be a rational being with no feelings at all than to be one that is happy and stupid or mad. Utilitarianism denigrates human dignity. Happiness implies that we should be rational for only then can we keep it and trust it and make it grow. It could be replied that realistically most people will not turn against reason that seriously and Utilitarianism is about what the world is like not what it could be like.

Happiness is too changeable for it to be the goal of morality and what morality is about. You can labour hard to make most people happiest and find no alternative only to discover that in a few weeks they are now tired of the benefits you got for them. It is too hard to predict.

The Utilitarian will argue that sometimes murder and rape are necessary but take comfort in the notion that these occasions will be extremely rare. But you cannot know if they will be. What if some kind of war breaks out and they become rife? Looting is always sure to happen in wartime! So why not the other evils?

We have destroyed the credibility of Utilitarianism.

## BAD ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE THEORY

Most bad arguments against consequentialism and utilitarianism are based on forgetting that they are a standard of duty or right action. They are not a decision procedure for its very hard to decide correctly.

It is said that Utilitarianism has no concern for whether your intentions are good or bad. So it is good if you cause great good when you meant to do harm. And if you mean to do good and disaster happens you are accountable and should be punished. But obviously there is more happiness in an action if you do it with the best of intentions. While it is true in theory it does consider doing bad that results in tremendous good as a good thing it cannot and does not do that in practice. Utilitarianism will have as many problems with criminal justice as every other system of morality has. When we punish we only hope it is fair and what more can we do?

“The happier you make yourself in all forms of Utilitarianism the less likely you are to become the sacrificial lamb on the altar of Utilitarian belief. So, to work, the theory has to forbid individual happiness. Thus it contradicts itself when everybody has to drag their chins on the ground to make everybody else happy!”

It allows individuals to be happy when it maximises happiness. Unhappy people make other people unhappy. Utilitarianism only allows some to be unhappy under certain circumstances. But these would be expected to pretend to be happy when necessary. If you take happiness in simplicity, in living the simple life, the objection won't be a problem for you.

"Lying and stealing are bad even when they are moral. In that case, they would be necessary evils. To lie is to oppose what is real and to steal is to oppose the security of another. In Ethics by A.C. Ewing we read, "It is fitting to rejoice in what is good in itself, therefore if it is an end-in-itself that the guilty should suffer, it is fitting to rejoice in their sufferings. But surely that is not the case: it is not fitting to gloat over the pain of anyone, even if he is a thoroughly bad man" (page 171). Nobody says we should hurt a bad man to hurt him and not to punish him. He has to be hurt for a reason or an end. Utilitarianism would urge us to rejoice in the necessary evils we commit and there is something vulgar and evil in that."

But if happiness is the greatest good what can you do? You are not bad for being happy about the evil if happiness is what is important? You would be allowed to laugh when an evil man dies if you are strapped up to a bomb that will be triggered to blow up the world if you do not laugh.

"If all people on earth could be strapped to machines that make them have happy dreams until their dying day and keep them alive and dead to the world, Utilitarianism would say that it is right as long as they have robots to make them reproduce to make babies to enjoy this incredible happiness."

This would be a good thing and only religion and spoilsports would dare to disagree. But as usual they can give no sensible reason that they could believe their position. Anyway, if there is a problem then why not have enough people connected up to make happiness tip the balance and not all people? That would still leave people to run the world. And Christianity offers you a Heaven where you cannot suffer for others and where there is only happiness. So this wonderful religion of sincerity believes after all that it is right to use the machine when it has its Heaven which is just the same! And yet it would have you believe that it doesn't.

"If people tend to do wrong as religion says then you cannot be a Utilitarian because your good works will probably be abused and used to harm."

But if you do bad or nothing they will be able to abuse that better so you when you cannot win do good. At least the good has shown a caring example if nothing else.

"Utilitarianism in all its forms leads to no room for acts that are over and above the call of duty for it makes it a duty to go the extra mile if it will maximise happiness."

The doctrine of supererogation, or acts of generosity, is wrong and is really a declaration that morality is just make-believe. You can do your duty in a generous spirit so there is no need for it.

"Utilitarianism says we should be happy or free from suffering. But if we should be happy then we must be more important than happiness and so it would be wrong to kill a person to promote happiness. Utilitarianism denies the absolute value of human life so it is not an ethical theory and it is very wrong".

But that does not refute Utilitarianism but it shows it needs to be modified. You can say that because human beings are absolute values the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be served as long as life is preserved and held to be sacrosanct.

Also, if Utilitarianism is the only ethical theory we can follow then it we cannot be accused of being unethical if we follow it. Its bad points and problems then would only show that it was not an ethical theory if there were a better alternative.

"Utilitarianism says the more happiness the better so it is a duty to have as many children as possible when you have good reason to believe that they will be happy".

Utilitarianism is not just about increasing happiness. It is only about increasing the happiness of people that exist and that involves concern for their future. It is a mistake to think you should have as many happy children as possible for you have no duty to people who do not exist. I mean you are not doing wrong by refusing to bring a person into existence.

Peter Singer wondered how if we have no duty to make non-existent people happy by bringing them into existence, then how come we have a duty not to make non-existent people who will suffer (page 104, Practical Ethics). But the difference is that in the first case no harm is done to anybody while the harm of making a person to suffer is done in the second. That is the answer.

Utilitarianism is the greatest secular happiness of the greatest number. Why? Because spiritual happiness cannot be tested

and people may claim to have such happiness as a boast and to be superior. "Oh I have the secret of happiness and God favours me to make me happy." Religion says such happiness comes before all other forms so Utilitarianism if it understands itself at all will be diligently secular. The alternative is theocracy and religious war. Each religion will be trying to enforce its understanding of Utilitarianism.

## Conclusion

Utilitarianism has serious problems but it has its merits too. It forces you to think it is working but you will think that on very subjective and shaky grounds. You may end up having to lie or do something normally bad to try and make sure it is maximising benefits for most people. Lies are often more trouble than they are worth. Also you are lying to yourself on some level about it. It is certainly true that the rivals of Utilitarianism are evil for they deny the principle that the greatest happiness of the greatest number comes first. That principle is correct whether we can put it into practice or not. Utilitarianism is itself a necessary evil. That is the general answer to the criticisms. It closes the case.

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