

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism based on the idea that an action can be categorized as good or bad by the results or outcomes of an action and the amount of either pleasure or pain that the action causes. Utilitarianism was founded by Jeremy Bentham with intentions of reforming the English legal system. It is considered one of the three major ethical theories in Western philosophy (Zack 174-75). The classical form of utilitarianism is often referred to as “act utilitarianism” since it deals with the morality of an individual act (Kay).

Utilitarianism is based on hedonism, which is the idea that pleasure is the only good and that pain or suffering is the only bad. It is different from pure hedonism in that when making a moral decision the person considers the impact or consequences of the action on others, rather than just themselves. In this regard, utilitarianism requires the person to act altruistically, not just in his own self-interest, but also taking into account the happiness or pain of the people affected by the action. From a Utilitarian point of view, all individuals are considered equal due to their capacity to suffer and experience pain. An action is considered morally good if the outcome of the action creates more pleasure for everyone involved or affected than it does pain or suffering.

John Stuart Mill referred to the idea of the most good for the most amount of people as the “principle of utility”. This principle, considered to be the foundation of utilitarianism, is then applied to making moral choices by carefully considering the consequences, and pleasure or pain realized by the action. Mill also expanded on the theory introduced by Jeremy Bentham by distinguishing between higher and lower pleasures. Bentham thought that all pleasures had the same value, and wrote, “all quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry” (qtd.

in Zack 175). According to Mill, different pleasures have different values. Mill thought that intellectual pleasures had a greater value than basic pleasures and when calculating the amount of pleasure brought about by an act these things needed to be taken into consideration. Mill moved utilitarianism beyond just the quantity of pleasure and pain, and introduced the idea that the quality of pleasure was also important to measure the rightness or wrongness of an act.

Rule Utilitarianism

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, rule utilitarianism is the idea of accepting or following rules in terms of the “goodness of their consequences” and that the rules, if generally accepted, “determine which kinds of acts are morally wrong” (Hooker). Rule utilitarianism was proposed as a solution to some of the problems and criticisms of the original theory (Kay). It is similar to the original theory in that the “principle of utility” is still applied in deciding whether or not a rule is good or bad. Rule utilitarianism differs from act utilitarianism in that once a rule is determined to have the greatest amount of good as a consequence; it is adopted as a universally moral way to act. Also once a rule is accepted as universally moral it is adhered to despite the possibility that it may not actually be the greatest good for the most amount of people in each and every case. In general, rule utilitarianism is applied to determine what would be best for society to accept as morally good and act utilitarianism is applied to determine what would be morally acceptable for the individual (Hooker).

Problems with Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism, as with other moral theories, does have philosophical problems. Rule Utilitarianism offers a possible remedy to the following problems with the original theory:

1. Act utilitarianism requires an exhaustive amount of calculation to be applied to decisions concerning the way to act. This can be problematic given the potential

- complexity of calculating the consequences, especially if the individual has a limited amount of time to perform the calculations (Hooker).
2. The theory does not protect individual rights. If it is the case that the greatest good involves violating a person's individual rights, then the act is, in theory, the morally right thing to do (Zack 357).
 3. The calculations required to evaluate an individual act are subject to biases and personal feelings about the subject or factors involved in performing the calculation (Hooker).

Analysis

The common criticisms of act utilitarianism listed above are remedied to some degree by the improved theory of rule utilitarianism. First, the improved theory eliminates much of the lengthy calculations required. By accepting certain rules as already meeting the criteria of the greatest good, it is no longer necessary to evaluate each act individually (Kay). Although this does present a problem when the rule is actually not the morally best thing to do in a given situation or does not adhere to the utility principle. For example, if it is wrong to kill, then under no circumstance would it be right to kill someone, even if killing that person would save the lives of many. The rule about killing is nonetheless good for a greater number in the broader sense.

Second, rule utilitarianism does protect the rights of individuals, to some degree. Certainly if a rule is determined to be good and adopted as a rule to follow, then exceptions are eliminated from being determined good. This includes sacrificing someone's individual rights to maximize a benefit for others. A fair rule that protects people's rights will, in theory, have better consequences for a greater number than a rule that doesn't (Zack 357). There still seems to be some problems in treating minorities fairly. When the majority decides the rightness or

wrongness of an action, and a rule is established as a general way to act, then the minorities are excluded from the process. What the majority decides may not actually be in everyone's best interest. John Stuart Mill described this problem as "the tyranny of the majority". Although act utilitarianism can be viewed as having the potential to abuse individual rights, rule utilitarianism has that potential too. There is a certain amount of freedom or autonomy lost in following the rules that someone else has determined to be the greatest good.

Third, the improved theory does eliminate, almost altogether, the problem with an individual's feelings getting in the way of making a morally sound decisions. If a rule is established and accepted as being the right thing to do then the rule should be followed, despite your personal bias or feelings about it.

Rule utilitarianism does seem to be an improvement to some degree. The theory does tackle the problem with lengthy calculations and personal feelings. However, it is doubtful that rule utilitarianism accomplishes these improvements without straying too far from the original principle. If the rules are to be followed rigidly then the advantages of considering the consequences are lost. The theory then becomes a rule theory rather than consequential or utilitarian. The autonomy to determine the goodness of an act is lost. Eliminating personal feelings is not entirely good either. The original theory requires a certain amount of feelings in order to determine the consequences in terms of pleasure and suffering.

Works Cited

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