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Utilitarian Principle

Utilitarianism was founded by Jeremy Bentham and is one of the most talked about normative ethical theories today. Bentham gave a simple and intuitive statement of the original Utilitarian principle, which was “(Do) The greatest good for the greatest number.” This statement is slightly misleading in that it appears to be appealing to a majority. In actuality, Bentham was referring to a much more in-depth calculation. Although Bentham’s calculation approach is appealing, there are still many valid criticisms that Act-Utilitarianism faces.

Because Bentham’s statement “(Do) The greatest good for the greatest number” is misleading, we have revised the statement to be the following: “The right act is the one that creates the greatest net, probable, foreseeable good, for all affected in the long run.” By revising his principle, we can render it more clearly, precisely and allow it to be workable.

An example of this theory is as follows: “Suppose you have a choice between two actions- one will have four units of good as its total consequences and the other will have five (counting everyone affected by the act). Should you do the first one?”¹ The answer, according to the Utilitarian ethicist, is “Yes, unless there is another act you could perform that would produce still more good. You should do the act that produces more total good than any other act that you could have performed instead. You can’t know whether act A is the right one unless you know whether some other act that you could have done would have even better consequences.”²

There are seven major factors to consider when evaluating this moral theory. The first is to be sure to take into account not only the good (positive) created, but to calculate the harm as well. For example, if one hundred people will be tortured unless you torture ten, then the obvious choice for the utilitarian is to torture the ten people in an effort to do the most good possible.

The second factor to consider is that “the greatest number” does not necessarily mean the majority. One person can experience five units of displeasure with one act and only experience two units of displeasure with a similar act. Though Bentham states that “each counts as one” (referring to each man counts as one regardless of who they are), there are still times when equal amounts of people

are affected by our actions and a decision must still be made based on the severity of the bad consequences or the rewards of the good ones.

A third factor to consider is how broadly we are required to consider the effects of our actions. The answer to this is “as broadly as they occur”. Our general duty is to remain informed. For example, it is our responsibility to know if Del Taco harms their tomato and lettuce workers, or to know if Nike is mistreating their workers, etc. If it were to be discovered that Del Taco is harming their tomato workers, while Taco Bell treats their workers well, then it is your duty or moral obligation to switch to Taco Bell or at least stop purchasing from Del Taco. “Ignorance is bliss”, but it is not an acceptable excuse to the utilitarian.

A fourth factor to consider is probability. Imagine if your family gave you their last ten dollars to go to the grocery store and buy as much food as possible. When you get to the store, you see the California Lottery booth and decide to spend all of the money on lottery tickets. If you were to win the lottery you would have millions of dollars and would have the ability to buy much more groceries than before, so it would seem that you have made the correct choice. However, if you consider the probability factor, the odds of you winning the lottery are very slim so you most likely will end up with zero dollars and no groceries to return to your family. Therefore, according to the Utilitarian, the correct decision would be to buy the groceries and not the lottery ticket.

A fifth consideration to make is that the Utilitarian must always consider the effects of both the ends and the means. For example, you can go to the dentist for a toothache and he can extract your tooth surgically and relieve you of the discomfort. That would be an example of justifying the means. On the other hand, the dentist could sit you in the chair and shoot you in the head, which would also relieve you of the pain (assuming you are dead), however the ends really are not justifying the means.

The sixth factor to consider when evaluating the Utilitarian moral theory, and that is to understand that duty is defined as subjective rather than objective or putative.

Objective duty is the act that has the actual best consequences. Although this sounds ideal, the only way to know for sure if an act is the best is to be omniscient. Giving an elderly lady a ride home seems like the right act at the time (assuming you are relieving her of some pain or inconvenience). However if you were to get hit by a drunk driver on the way to her house and she dies, clearly it was not the best decision. The problem is that there was no way to predict the future so you can't base your actions off of such a theory.

Putative duty is the act that you think will have the best consequences. Unfortunately for this approach, it allows for too much ignorance. For example,

buying the lottery ticket instead food for your family would be accepted under this method and not require any research because you thought you were doing the right thing.

Subjective duty is the act that, on the best evidence is most likely to have the best consequences. For the Utilitarian, this is the best definition of our duty. It requires one to weigh the good and bad in every situation and make decisions, without the need to be omniscient.

The seventh major factor to consider when evaluating the Utilitarian moral theory is that, when viewing the standard rules such as don't kill, don't lie, etc, the Utilitarian would define them as good empirical generalizations. For example, if you were to refrain from killing, it would be good for everybody. Same if you were to refrain from lying or breaking promises. These rules are very basic and can be obviously seen to create the "greatest good for the greater number."

Taking all of these seven factors into consideration, a Utilitarian would have to answer the following questions before breaking a moral rule: 1) Do I have sufficient evidence? 2) Do I want to break the rule? 3) Will this set an example for others? And 4) Will I set a precedent for myself? By weighing the good and bad consequences of these questions, a Utilitarian can determine whether breaking a moral rule is justified or not.

There are several criticisms of the Utilitarian theory of morality, but two of them are the most common. 1) That supererogation is impossible, and 2) That in order to be a utilitarian, one must become a cold-hearted calculating machine.

A supererogation act is one that is above and beyond the call of duty. To a Utilitarian, there is no supererogation and it is believed to be your moral duty to not be ignorant. For example, being required to know how Taco Bell and Del Taco treat their tomato workers before deciding to eat their food. Having to calculate just one or two of these scenarios does not sound that demanding, but when you start thinking of everything you eat and use in a day, the required research to ensure you are making the correct choices can be overwhelming. If you use a computer you would be required to know how it was made, how the worker that made it was treated, etc. You would be required to know everything about the clothes you are wearing, the hair product you are using, and so on. Although experiences, rules, time limits, and the formation of good habits will eventually make this process easier, some would argue that it is still supererogation and that it is impossible to achieve.

Another common criticism of this theory is that in order to be a utilitarian one must be a cold-hearted calculating machine. For example, if terrorists threatened to kill five Harvard graduates unless you killed your own daughter, you would

have to set aside all of your emotions and kill your daughter, for the “the greatest good for the greater number.” To some this action would seem to be cold-hearted, but others would argue that it is best to keep our emotions out of the decisions we make as much as possible.

Jeremy Bentham’s Act-Utilitarianism is almost a solid ethical theory if it would have accounted for supererogation. Given the revised principle, one is only required to make decisions based on what is a probable and foreseeable good for the long run. If Jeremy had accounted for supererogation by say, limiting the amount of research one is required to do, or somehow accounting for the time it would take to invest in such knowledge versus the time that could be spent doing something that would produce a greater good, then it would probably be a more widely accepted theory.

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1. John Hospers, Human Conduct: Problems of Ethics (p.139)
 2. John Hospers, Human Conduct: Problems of Ethics (p.139)