



Utilitarianism in a Nutshell (or Why No One Likes a Consequentialist)

Michael S. Russo
Department of Philosophy
Molloy College

Utilitarianism is one of the most important consequentialist approaches to ethics. A consequentialist approach is one which argues that human beings ought to act in a way that brings about the best possible results from their actions. According to this approach, then, it really doesn't matter what kind of acts we perform or what our intentions are when performing them, as long as the effects of our acts are generally positive. If such an approach makes sense intuitively it is because most of us are taught to be good consequentialists growing up. When a child's parents shout at him, "did you ever stop to think how your actions effected anyone else?" these parents are in fact adopting a consequentialist approach to their children's behavior. Our public policy in the United States also tends for the most part to be consequentialist. Whether we are talking about decriminalizing drug use or reducing welfare benefits, the common question that elected officials will raise is "what will the effects of this policy be on the average citizen?"

The two major forms consequentialist theory takes are ethical egoism and utilitarianism. Although both of these forms look to the positive consequences of an act to determine whether it is right, they differ with respect to who ought to benefit from these positive consequences. An ethical egoist would argue that one ought to work to promote one's own good, while a utilitarian would maintain that one ought to work for the good of all who are affected by an act.

Although there are many different utilitarian approaches, all of them are based upon the writings of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), who can properly be called the founding fathers of the utilitarian movement. What all utilitarians have in common is that they accept one and only one principle of morality, the principle of utility, which states that in all our actions we must always strive to produce the greatest possible balance of good over evil. In other words, a utilitarian would hold that if have a choice between different courses of action, we should always aim at choosing the one that has the best overall consequences for all those who might be affected by our actions.

To determine whether the outcomes of our actions are indeed going to produce the maximum balance of good over evil for all who are involved, a utilitarian would say that we need to engage in what is know as a "utilitarian calculus." We begin by weighing the positive and negative consequences of an action. If the act produces a greater amount of good than evil for all those who are affected by the act, then the act is good; if not, the act is

bad. For example, Mildred Schlossberg, a high school senior, is trying to decide whether or not she should lie about the fact that she is currently dating her friend's former boyfriend. Weighing the positive and negative consequences of the act, Mildred realizes that, on the one hand, if she tells her friend the truth it might cause her pain, since she still has feelings for her former flame; telling the truth might also cause her friend to feel that Mildred has betrayed her, thus putting their relationship into jeopardy. On the other hand, Mildred realizes that if she attempts to deceive her friend about the relationship, she is almost certain to find out anyway; she also believes that a relationship starting under such dubious conditions might not last very long; finally, she thinks that it would be horrible to have to sneak around all the time in order to prevent her friend from finding out what is going on. Weighing the consequences of each possible course of action, she decides that the greatest good will ultimately be achieved by telling her friend the truth about the relationship. Many people engage in this type of utilitarian calculus automatically when they are contemplating important decisions in life. Every time we weigh the pros and cons of a certain action, we are essentially engaged in a type of utilitarian calculus.

There are two major forms that utilitarianism usually takes. Act Utilitarianism maintains that for each individual act we are about to perform, we need to appeal directly to the principle of utility. In each instance we must ask ourselves whether this specific act in this circumstance will produce the greatest amount of good over evil. But what about moral rules that are commonly accepted, such as "don't lie." Can't rules like these be used as a guide for one's actions? According to John Stuart Mill, such rules, while in general appropriate to follow, cannot be used as an absolute guide in moral decision-making. There are many instances when lying, in fact, may be perfectly acceptable—for example, when telling the truth will subject an innocent to a greater evil. The individual who lies to thugs about where their victim is hiding is also probably behaving properly even though he is forced to resort to a deception. Mill's point is that while relying on moral rules may be helpful at times, when following those rules causes more harm than good, we should not hesitate to discard them.

One obvious problem with act utilitarianism is that it seems like an impractical approach for helping to guide one in moral decision-making. In the first place, although a person may be able to gauge the direct and immediate effects of his action, it is considerably more difficult to gauge the indirect and long-term effects. Indeed one might argue that it is in fact impossible to calculate every possible consequence of an action. An act might very well produce positive benefits initially, but in the long run might prove extremely harmful. A second problem with act utilitarianism is that when an individual is faced with a moral dilemma, he is often required to make instantaneous decisions. If he has to weigh the positive and negative effects of each action that he is about to perform, and also consider long-term effects, he will ultimately be paralyzed. Therefore if we are to be able to make useful moral decisions, we need to have some clear and concrete rules that can be appealed to in various circumstances.

It was for this reason that rule utilitarianism was developed. According to this approach, certain moral rules, if followed, will always produce the greatest amount of good over evil. Thus a rule utilitarian would maintain that instead of each individual acting to bring about the greatest amount of good over evil, everyone should follow those *rules* which will tend to bring about the greatest amount of good. For example, instead of wondering in each and every moral situation whether one ought to tell the truth or not, one would establish a

rule like the following: “one should always tell the truth because doing so will produce the greater good.” Certainly it might be the case that in a specific situation telling the truth will not produce good consequences (for example telling one’s already depressed grandfather that he has only six months to live), but in general, the rule utilitarian would argue that it is in the best interest of society if everyone told the truth.

Having briefly sketched out the utilitarian approach to moral decision-making, it remains to be seen whether this approach can serve as an acceptable system of ethics for a Christian. Certainly the utilitarian approach is to be credited for the attempt it makes to look beyond the individual’s own interest in determining which actions are right and wrong. Any legitimate utilitarian must always be concerned with how his actions affect others, his own well-being weighing no more heavily than any other’s in determining which actions he should or should not perform. “The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent’s own happiness,” writes Mill, “but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarians require him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.”¹ Indeed in certain circumstances a utilitarian may even be obligated to sacrifice his own happiness and well-being if doing so will help to promote the greater good. In this sense, utilitarianism represents a marked improvement over approaches which make self-interest the basis for ethical decision making, and is certainly preferable to moral subjectivism insofar as it provides some kind of objective standard of right and wrong.

Despite all this, utilitarianism must be recognized as a completely unacceptable moral system from a Christian perspective. In the first place, utilitarianism could easily be used to violate the rights of an individual or a minority for the benefit of the majority. For example, suppose a utilitarian has to decide whether or not painful scientific studies on orphaned mentally retarded children ought to be performed. He is convinced that these experiments could realistically lead to a cure that could save thousands of “normal” children in the future. This kind of experimentation could easily be justified by engaging in a utilitarian calculus. The experiments would not cause mental pain to others because the children are orphaned, and their disability—assuming that it is severe enough—would prevent them from having the kind of mental anguish that many of us would have knowing we were about to be experimented on against our wills. If unfortunate accidents did occur as a result of the experimentation that cut short the lives of these children, at least the experimenters would have the satisfaction of knowing that the future prospects of these children were dim anyway, and, had they lived, they would only have been a drain on the resources of society. Consequently, our utilitarian researcher should have no qualms about performing these experiments, even though such practices would be rejected completely by most civilized people.²

A utilitarian approach can also easily be used to violate the principles of justice. The most basic demands of justice state that we treat people fairly and reward or punish them based upon their own merits. As the following imaginary case illustrates, it is all too easy to violate this principle using a utilitarian approach:

Suppose a utilitarian were visiting an area in which there was racial strife, and that, during his visit, a Negro rapes a white woman, and that race riots occur as a result of the crime, white mobs, with the connivance of the police, bashing and killing Negroes, etc. Suppose too that our utilitarian is in the area of the crime when it is

committed such that his testimony would bring about the conviction of a particular Negro. If he knows that a quick arrest will stop the riots and lynchings, surely, as a utilitarian, he must conclude that he has a duty to bear false witness in order to bring about the punishment of an innocent person.³

A utilitarian in this position would have to support the idea of bearing false witness against an innocent man. Weighing his options, he would certainly realize that the benefits of a return to public order far outweigh the need to protect the life of one innocent human being.

The utilitarian calculus used in both cases described above is neat and precise, but it is also completely repugnant from a Christian perspective. A Christian must hold that each and every individual has value and worth in and of himself. Even the preservation of the public order cannot be used as an excuse to treat individuals unjustly or to sacrifice their most fundamental rights. For these reasons a utilitarian approach must be rejected as a foundation for a Christian ethical system. It remains to be seen, however, if deontology can provide a more acceptable alternative.

SOURCES

¹ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861).

² Peter Singer, a prominent utilitarian thinker uses a similar line of argumentation when he maintains that if we indeed had to perform such experimentations, it would be preferable to do so on severely mentally handicapped orphans than on healthy rats. The rats, he says, would be “more intelligent, more aware of what is happening to them, more sensitive to pain, and so on, than many severely brain damaged humans barely surviving in hospital wards and other institutions.” See *Practical Ethics*. 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 67-68.

³ H.J. McCloskey, “A Non-Utilitarian Approach to Punishment.” *Inquiry* 8 (1965) 239-255.