Utilitarianism

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In this paper, I shall attempt to first briefly summarize the key points of classical utilitarian thinking as proposed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill; second, describe a situation where a moral dilemma presents itself; third, critically analyze the case and the decisions taken therein from a utilitarian lens.

In any action or ethical decision, one may ask what holds more importance: the intent or the consequence. Utilitarianism, broadly under the umbrella of consequentialism, contends the latter. The motivation is irrelevant, and the moral 'correctness' of the action may only be seen via its outcomes. The theory contends that the worth of actions may only be measured via the pleasure or happiness they produce. Utilitarians argue that there is nothing more essential than our desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain and regard it as the intuitive moral grounding for this theory. Thus, the argument follows that happiness is the supreme motivation for any action we undertake. Utilitarianism differs from other consequentialist views like egoism and altruism in its other-regarding and observer-independent nature: it considers the interests of all humans equally. Thus, this entails that you, the person taking action, are no more important than any other affected by your decision. An oft-cited criticism of utilitarianism is that each human has a proclivity and a bias towards their own well-being, making the principle of utility ('greatest good for the greatest number') challenging to apply in practice.

The iteration of utilitarian arguments may be used to criticize utilitarianism for its other-regarding nature. Imagine a class of utilitarians on a hiking expedition who take a wrong turn and are lost in the jungle. The group depletes its supply of food quickly and goes hungry for days. Finally, they come across some food. However, there is only enough food for some people to avoid starvation. An individual may conclude that to maximize survival and, thus, the happiness of his compatriots, he has a moral obligation to starve and let his compatriots survive. Fair enough, the remaining group mourns his demise. Just as they're about to eat, another individual concludes that he has a moral obligation to starve and let his compatriots have his

portion and get better nutrition. If we continue reiterating this argument, we are left with no survivors and a bounty of food.

Now, we consider the very topical situation of vaccination for infectious diseases. This scenario provides an excellent playground for applying, analyzing, and extending utilitarian thinking. Assuming that there is nothing inherently pleasurable about getting injected, why should I get vaccinated? The first reason would be to gain immunity and avoid illness, which would lend itself to a better life and, thus, my happiness. Once sufficiently many people get vaccinated, herd immunity kicks in, which is non-excludable; that is, there is no way to exclude non-vaccinated people from deriving its benefits. If I am benefitting from herd immunity regardless of my vaccination status, why should I endure the pain of vaccination? One may argue that since herd immunity is already there, there exists no moral compulsion for me to get vaccinated. However, this argument may then be repeated by the next person and iterated to the point where herd immunity is lost entirely. Thus, my action may lead to the *consequence* that is the loss of herd immunity and public health being detrimentally affected. The consequentialist may then hold me morally responsible for the deaths that come from this.

Using the principle of utility, I can conclude that vaccination leads to better public health, regardless of herd immunity status, which may then be argued as a necessity for societal happiness. Thus, utilitarian philosophy will conclude that I should get vaccinated.

The above argument seemingly justifies mandatory vaccination of all members of society. The choice is taken away from the individual if it is made compulsory. Does utilitarianism then justify taking away liberty from the people in the name of ‘the greater good’?

One may argue that the individual may choose to get vaccinated under the moral obligation discussed above and that the mandate is but a formality. Looking from a purely consequential lens, we would see that the disease has been eradicated and is no longer a burden on society. Thus, the action of making vaccination compulsory would lead to the ‘greatest good for the greatest number.’ Here the individual and societal good have a common goal and, thus, lead to an

acceptable outcome. What happens when the individual's moral obligation conflicts with the greater good of society? Is coercive action justified?

The above questions may be considered for further study as they are beyond the scope of this paper.