**Handouts of Lecture 4 Professional Practices (IT)**

**Lecture Title: Introduction to Ethics (continued)**

**Ethical Egoism**

In sharp contrast to the divine command theory, which promotes a concern for others

with scriptural injunctions such as “Love your neighbor as yourself,” ethical egoism is

the philosophy that each person should focus exclusively on his or her self-interest. In

other words, according to ethical egoism, the morally right action for a person to take

in a situation is the action that will provide that person with the maximum long-term benefit.

Ethical egoism does not prohibit acting to help someone else, but assisting another

is the right thing to do if and only if it is in the helper’s own long-term best interest.

Here’s an example from the writings of Douglas Birsch. Suppose I depend upon a

friend to give me a ride to work every day. Ifmy friend’s car breaks down and she doesn’t

have $100 to fix it, I ought to loan her the money. Although I’m out $100 until she pays

me back, I’m better off giving her the loan because I’m still able to travel to work and

make money. If I don’t lend her the money, I’ll lose my income. Lending $100 to my

friend is the right thing to do because it provides me the maximum overall benefit.

**The Case for Ethical Egoism**

**1. *Ethical egoism is a practical moral philosophy.***

We are naturally inclined to do what’s best for ourselves because each of us has only

one life to live, and we want to make the best of it. Unlike other moral codes that

ask us to sacrifice our own well-being for the good of other people, ethical egoism

recognizes that we should focus on our own well-being.

**2. *It’s better to let other people take care of themselves.***

We can’t know for sure what is good for someone else. All too often, a “good deed”

backfires and does more harm than good. Even when people appreciate something done

of their behalf, it’s not healthy. Dependence upon the charity of others lead to a loss

of self-esteem. In contrast, people who accomplish things through their own efforts have

higher self-esteem and are able to interact with other successful people as equals.

**3. *The community can benefit when individuals put their well-being first.***

When individuals act in their own self-interest, they often benefit not only themselves

but others as well. For example, successful entrepreneurs may make a lot of

money for themselves, but they also create jobs that strengthen the economy.

**4. *Other moral principles are rooted in the principle of self-interest.***

Ethical egoism is a rational philosophy. Any rational person will figure out that it

doesn’t make sense to go around breaking promises, because eventually people will

realize that the promise-breaker cannot be trusted, and they will refuse to cooperate

with that person. Therefore, it’s not in a person’s long-term self-interest to break

promises. Likewise, it’s a bad idea to lie to other people or cheat other people

because the long-term consequences of lying and cheating are detrimental to the

person doing these things. For this reason, it can be seen that other well-known

moral principles are rooted in the principle of self-interest.

**The Case against Ethical Egoism**

**1. *An easy moral philosophy may not be the best moral philosophy.***

The fact that it may be easier to live by a particular moral philosophy is no proof

that it is the best moral philosophy to live by. Besides, the statement that ethical

egoism aligns with our natural inclination to do what’s best for ourselves ignores

the fact that people often find it difficult to pass up short-term pleasures (such as

partying) in order achieve goals that will most likely result in long-term benefits

(such as passing the classes needed to earn a college degree).

**2.** ***We do, in fact, know a lot about what is good for someone else.***

Practically everyone shares the “core values” of life, happiness, and the ability to accomplish

goals. It’s not that hard to figure out what would help another. The question is, how are we going

to respond to that person’s need? Charity usually doesn’t lead to dependence; rather, it gives

someone the opportunity to become more independent. Consider, for example, how a

scholarship can provide a bright high school student from a poor family with a path to a university

degree, a well-paying job, and self-sufficiency.

**3. *A self-interested focus can lead to blatantly immoral behavior.***

Here is a true story related by James Rachels. An affluent doctor in a small

Southern town in the 1970s was visited by a poor, uneducated African American

woman, who had a variety of minor complaints. The doctor quickly determined

that the woman was suffering from malnutrition. He knew that she worked a variety

of menial jobs, but earned very little money to support herself or her children.

After spending no more than five minutes with her, and doing nothing for her, the

doctor told her the charge would be $25. The woman had only $12 to her name,

so the doctor took the $12 as payment, leaving the woman with no money to buy

food. There were no negative consequences to the doctor as a result of his action.

According to the theory of ethical egoism, the doctor did the right thing: he was

only supposed to take his own interest into account, and receiving $12 from the

woman was to his advantage. This answer, however, is incorrect; what the doctor

did was morally reprehensible.

**4. *Other moral principles are superior to the principle of self-interest.***

Suppose you can save a drowning person at the cost of getting one of your shirtsleeves

wet. According to the theory of ethical egoism, saving a life is the right thing to do if and

only if that action will provide you with the maximum benefit. Possible benefits from

saving a drowning person include earning that person’s undying gratitude and gaining

favorable publicity. But isn’t this a backward and degrading way of evaluating the action?

Doesn’t it make a lot more sense to consider the action in light of the value of a human life?

If you can save a human life with no significant negative consequences to yourself, you

should do it, even if your action is not rewarded. This example demonstrates that the

principle of preserving life is superior to the principle of self-interest.

**5. *People who take the good of others into account live happier lives.***

In the Framingham Heart Study, which followed 5,000 individuals over a 20-year

period, scientists discovered that happiness spreads through close relationships with

family members, friends, and neighbors. In order to create and maintain close

relationships with other people, it is necessary to consider what is good for them.

Ethical egoism does not respect the ethical point of view: it does not recognize that

in order to reap the benefits of living in community, individuals must consider the good

of other community members. For this reason, we reject ethical egoism as a workable

ethical theory.

**Kantianism**

Kantianism is the name given to the ethical theory of the German philosopher Immanuel

Kant (1724–1804). Kant spent his entire life in or near K¨onigsberg in East Prussia,

where he was a professor at the university. Kant believed that people’s actions ought

to be guided by moral laws, and that these moral laws were universal. He held that in

order to apply to all rational beings, any supreme principle of morality must itself be

based on reason. While many of the moral laws Kant describes can also be found in the

Bible, Kant’s methodology allows these laws to be derived through a reasoning process.

A Kantian is able to go beyond simply stating that an action is right or wrong by citing

chapter and verse; a Kantian can explain *why* it is right or wrong.

**Good Will and the Categorical Imperative**

Kant begins his inquiry by asking, “What is always good without qualification?” Many

things, such as intelligence and courage, can be good, but they can also be used in a way

that is harmful. For example, a group of gangsters may use intelligence and courage to

rob a bank. Kant’s conclusion is that the only thing in the world that can be called good

without qualification is a good will. People with good will often accomplish good deeds,

but producing beneficial outcomes is not what makes a good will good. A good will is

good in and of itself. Even if a person’s best efforts at doing good should fall short and

cause harm, the good will behind the efforts is still good. Since a good will is the only

thing that is universally good, the proper function of reason is to cultivate a will that is

good in itself.

Most of us have probably had many experiences when we’ve been torn between what

we want to do and what we ought to do. According to Kant, what we want to do is

of no importance. Our focus should be on what we ought to do. Our sense of “ought

to” is called **dutifulness**. A dutiful person feels compelled to act in a certain way

out of respect for some moral rule. Our will, then, should be grounded in a conception

of moral rules. The moral value of an action depends upon the underlying moral rule.

It is critical, therefore, that we be able to determine if our actions are grounded in an

appropriate moral rule.

What makes a moral rule appropriate? To enable us to answer this question, Kant

proposes the Categorical Imperative.

**Categorical Imperative (First Formulation)**

Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be

universal moral laws.

To illustrate the Categorical Imperative, Kant poses the problem of an individual in

a difficult situation who must decide if he will make a promise with the intention of later

breaking it. The translation of this moral rule could be as follows: “A person may make

a false promise when that is the only way to escape a difficult situation.”

To evaluate this moral rule, we universalize it. What would happen if everybody in

extreme circumstances made false promises? If that were the case, nobody would believe

promises, and it would be impossible for our individual in distress to make a promise

that anyone believed. The moral rule self-destructs when we try to make it a universal

law. Therefore, it is wrong for a person in distress to make a promise with the intention

of breaking it.

It is important to see that Kant is *not* arguing that the consequences of everybody

breaking promises would be to undermine interpersonal relationships, increase

violence, and make people miserable, and that is why we cannot imagine turning our

hypothetical moral rule into a universal law. Rather, Kant is saying that simply willing

that our moral rule become a universal law produces a logical contradiction.

Let’s see how. Suppose I am the person who can escape from a difficult situation by

making a promise I intend to break later on. On the one hand, it is my will that I be able

to make a promise that is believed. After all, that’s what promises are for. If my promise

isn’t believed, I won’t be able to get out of the difficult situation I am in. But when I

universalize the moral rule, I am willing that everybody be able to break promises. If

that were a reality, then promises would not be believable, which means there would be

no such thing as a promise. If there were no such thing as a promise, I would not

be able to make a promise to get myself out of a difficult situation. Trying to universalize

our proposed moral rule leads to a contradiction.

Here’s another way to see why the proposed action is wrong. In order for my false

promise to be believed, I want everyone *except* myself to be truthful all the time. Because

there is a contradiction between what I wish to do and how I expect others in a similar

situation to act, I know that what I am considering doing is wrong.

If you are wondering if it is morally acceptable to do something to someone else,

reverse roles. What would you think if that person did the same thing to you? If you

cannot wish to be treated that way by another, you have evidence that your will to treat

another person that way violates the Categorical Imperative.

Kant also presents a second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, which many

people find easier to work with.

**Categorical Imperative (Second Formulation)**

Act so that you always treat both yourself and other people as ends in

themselves, and never only as a means to an end.

To use popular terminology, the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative

says it is wrong for one person to “use” another. Instead, every interaction

with other people must respect them as rational beings.

Here is an example that illustrates how we can apply the second formulation. Suppose

I manage a semiconductor fabrication plant for a large corporation. The plant

manufactures integrated circuits on 8-inch wafers. I know that in one year the corporation

is going to shut down the plant and move all of its production to other sites capable

of producing 12-inch wafers. In the meantime, I need new employees to work in the

clean room. Many of the best applicants are from out of state. I am afraid that if they

knew the plant was going to shut down next year, they would not want to go through the

hassle and expense of moving to this area. If that happens, I’ll have to hire less qualified

local workers. Should I disclose this information to the job applicants?

According to the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, I have an obligation

to inform the applicants, since I know this information is likely to influence their

decision. If I deny them this information, I am treating them as a means to an end (a

way to get wafers produced), not as ends in themselves (rational beings).

**Evaluating a Scenario Using Kantianism**

Carla is a single mother who is working hard to complete her college education

while taking care of her daughter. Carla has a full-time job and is taking two

evening courses per semester. If she can pass both courses this semester, she will

graduate. She knows her child will benefit if she can spend more time at home.

One of her required classes is modern European history. In addition to

the midterm and final examinations, the professor assigns four lengthy reports,

which is far more than the usual amount of work required for a single class.

Students must submit all four reports in order to pass the class.

Carla earns an A on each of her first three reports. At the end of the term,

she is required to put in a lot of overtime where she works. She simply does not

have time to research and write the final report. Carla uses the Web to identify a

company that sells term papers. She purchases a report from the company and

submits it as her own work.

Was Carla’s action morally justifiable?

***Analysis***

Many times, it is easier to use the second formulation of the Categorical

Imperative to analyze a moral problem from a Kantian point of view, so that’s

where we begin. By submitting another person’s work as her own, Carla treated

her professor as a means to an end. She deceived her professor with the goal

of getting credit for someone else’s work. It was wrong for Carla to treat the

professor as a grade-generating machine rather than a rational agent with whom

she could have communicated her unusual circumstances.

We can also look at this problem using the first formulation of the

Categorical Imperative. Carla wants to be able to get credit for turning in a report

she has purchased. A proposed moral rule might be, “I may claim academic

credit for a report written by someone else.” However, if everyone followed this

rule, reports would cease to be credible indicators of the students’ knowledge,

and professors would not give academic credit for reports. Her proposed moral

rule is self-defeating. Therefore, it is wrong for Carla to purchase a report and

turn it in as her own work.

***Commentary***

Note that the Kantian analysis of the moral problem focuses on the will behind

the action. It asks the question, “What was Carla trying to do when she submitted

under her own name a term paper written by someone else?” The analysis ignores

extenuating circumstances that non-Kantians may cite to justify her action.

**The Case for Kantianism**

**1. *The Categorical Imperative aligns with the common moral concern, “What if everybody***

***acted that way?”***

According to Kantianism, it is wrong for you to act in a particular way if you cannot

wish everyone in a similar circumstance to do the same thing. This is a mainstream,

commonsensical, and fair perspective.

**2. *Kantianism produces universal moral guidelines.***

Kantianism aligns with the intuition of many people that the same morality ought

to apply to all people for all of history. These guidelines allow us to make clear moral

judgments. For example, one such judgment might be the following: “Sacrificing

living human beings to appease the gods is wrong.” It is wrong in Europe in the

twenty-first century, and it was wrong in South America in the fifteenth century.

**3.** ***All persons are treated as moral equals.***

A popular belief is that “all people are created equal.” Because it holds that people in

similar situations should be treated in similar ways, Kantianism provides an ethical

framework to combat discrimination.

**The Case against Kantianism**

**1. *Sometimes*** ***no single rule fully characterizes an action.***

Kant holds that every action is motivated from a rule. The appropriate rule depends

upon how we characterize the action. Once we know the rule, we can test

its value using the Categorical Imperative. What happens when no single rule fully

explains the situation? Douglas Birsch gives this example: Suppose I’m considering

stealing food from a grocery store to feed my starving children [4]. How should I

characterize this action? Am I stealing? Am I caring for my children? Am I trying

to save the lives of innocent people? Until I characterize my action, I cannot determine

the rule and test it against the Categorical Imperative. Yet no single one of

these ways of characterizing the action seems to capture the ethical problem in its

fullness.

**2. *Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules.***

One way to address the previous problem is to allow multiple rules to be relevant

to a particular action. In the previous example, we might say that the relevant rules

are (1) you should not steal and (2) you should try to save the lives of innocent

persons. Now the question becomes, if we have a conflict between two rules, which

one should we follow?

Kant distinguished between **perfect duties**, duties we are obliged to fulfill in

each instance, and **imperfect duties**, duties we are obliged to fulfill in general but

not in every instance. For example, you have a perfect duty to tell the truth. That

means you must always tell the truth without exception. On the other hand, you

have an imperfect duty to develop your talents. If you happen to have a talent for

music, you ought to find a way to develop it, but you do not have to take up every

instrument in the orchestra.

If we have a conflict between a perfect duty and an imperfect duty, the perfect

duty must prevail. Returning to our example, we have a perfect duty not to steal.

In contrast, we have only an imperfect duty to help others. Therefore, according to

Kant, it is wrong to steal bread to feed my starving children.

In this case we were fortunate because the conflict was between a perfect duty

and an imperfect duty. In those cases where there is a conflict between perfect duties,

Kantianism does not provide us a way to choose between them.

**3.** ***Kantianism allows no exceptions to perfect duties.***

Common sense tells us that sometimes we ought to “bend” the rules a bit if we want

to get along with other people. For example, suppose your mother asks you if you

like her new haircut, and you think it is the ugliest haircut you have ever seen. What

should you say? Common sense dictates that there is no point in criticizing your

mother’s hair. She certainly isn’t going to get her hair uncut, no matter what you

say. If you compliment her, she will be happy, and if you criticize her looks, she will

be angry and hurt. She expects you to say something complimentary, even if you

don’t mean it. There just seems to be no downside to lying. Yet a Kantian would

argue that lying is always wrong because we have a perfect duty to tell the truth.

Any ethical theory so unbending is not going to be useful for solving “real-world”

problems.

While these objections point out weaknesses with Kantianism, the theory does

support moral decision making based on logical reasoning from facts and commonly

held values. It is culture neutral and treats all humans as equals. Hence it meets our

criteria for a workable ethical theory, and we will use it as a way of evaluating moral

problems in the rest of the course.

**Act Utilitarianism**

The English philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–

1873) proposed a theory that is in sharp contrast to Kantianism. According to Bentham

and Mill, an action is good if its benefits exceed its harms, and an action is bad if its

harms exceed its benefits. Their ethical theory, called **utilitarianism**, is based upon the

principle of utility, also called the Greatest Happiness Principle.

**Principle of Utility**

**Utility** is the tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an

individual or a community. Depending on the circumstances, you may think of “happiness”

as advantage, benefit, good, or pleasure, and “unhappiness” as disadvantage, cost,

evil, or pain.

**Principle of Utility (Greatest Happiness Principle)**

An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the

total happiness of the affected parties.

We can use the principle of utility as a yardstick to judge all actions in the moral

realm. Suppose in a particular situation we have a set of possible actions. For each

possible action, we must determine, for each affected person, the increase or decrease

in that person’s happiness and then add up all of these values to reach a grand total: the

overall increase or decrease in happiness caused by that particular action.

We repeat this procedure for every action in the set of possible actions. The moral action

is the one that produces the maximum increase in happiness. (If every possible action

results in a decrease in happiness, then the moral action is the one that minimizes the

decrease in happiness.)

Note that the morality of an action has nothing to do with the attitude behind the

action. Bentham writes, “There is no such thing as any sort of motive that is in itself a

bad one. If [motives] are good or bad, it is only on account of their effects”. We call

utilitarianism a **consequentialist** theory, because the focus is on the consequences of an

action.

**Act utilitarianism** is the ethical theory that an action is good if its net effect (over all

affected beings) is to produce more happiness than unhappiness. Suppose we measure

pleasure as a positive number and pain as a negative number. To make amoral evaluation

of an action, we simply add up, over all affected beings, the change in their happiness. If

the sum is positive, the action is good. If the sum is negative, the action is bad.

Did you notice that I used the word “beings” rather than “persons” in the previous

paragraph? An important decision an act utilitarian must make is determining which

beings are considered to be morally significant. Bentham noted that at one time only

adult white males were considered morally significant beings. Bentham felt that any

being that can experience pain and pleasure ought to be seen as morally significant.

Certainly women and people of color are morally significant beings by this definition,

but in addition all mammals (and perhaps other animals) are morally significant beings,

because they, too, can experience pain and pleasure. Of course, as the number of morally

significant beings increases, the difficulty of evaluating the consequences of an action

also increases. It means, for example, that the environmental impacts of decisions must

often be included when performing the utilitarian calculus.

**Evaluating a Scenario Using Act Utilitarianism**

**Scenario**

A state is considering replacing a curvy stretch of highway that passes along the

outskirts of a large city. Would building the highway be a good action?

***Analysis***

To perform the analysis of this problem, we must determine who is affected

and the effects of the highway construction on them. Our analysis is in terms of

dollars and cents. For this reason, we’ll use the terms “benefit” and “cost” instead

of “happiness” and “unhappiness.”

About 150 houses lie on or very near the proposed path of the new,

straighter section of highway. Using its power of eminent domain, the state

can condemn these properties. It would cost the state $20 million to provide

fair compensation to the homeowners. Constructing the new highway, which

is three miles long, would cost the taxpayers of the state another $10 million.

Suppose the environmental impact of the new highway in terms of lost habitat

for morally significant animal species is valued at $1 million.

Every weekday, 15,000 cars are expected to travel on this section of highway,

which is one mile shorter than the curvy highway it replaces. Assuming it costs

40 cents per mile to operate a motor vehicle, construction of the new highway

will save drivers $6,000 per weekday in operating costs. The highway has an

expected operating lifetime of 25 years. Over a 25-year period, the expected total

savings to drivers will be $39 million.

We’ll assume the highway project will have no positive or negative effects on

any other people. Since the overall cost of the new highway is $31 million and

the benefit of the new highway is $39 million, building the highway would be a

good action.

***Commentary***

Performing the benefit/cost (or happiness/unhappiness) calculations is crucial to

the utilitarian approach, yet it can be controversial. In our example, we translated

everything into dollars and cents. Was that reasonable? Neighborhoods are the

site of many important relationships. We did not assign a value to the harm the

proposed highway would do to these neighborhoods. There is a good chance

that many of the homeowners would be angry about being forced out of their

houses, even if they were paid a fair price for their properties. How do we put a

dollar value on their emotional distress? On the other hand, we can’t add apples

and oranges. Translating everything into dollars and cents is one way to put

everything into common units. \_

Bentham acknowledged that a complete analysis must look beyond simple benefits

and harms. Not all benefits have equal weight. To measure them, he proposed seven

attributes that can be used to increase or decrease the weight of a particular pleasure or

pain:

. *Intensity:* magnitude of the experience

. *Duration:* how long the experience lasts

. *Certainty:* probability it will actually happen

. *Propinquity:* how close the experience is in space and time

. *Fecundity:* its ability to produce more experiences of the same kind

. *Purity:* extent to which pleasure is not diluted by pain or vice versa

. *Extent:* number of people affected

As you can see, performing a complete calculation for a moral problem can

be a daunting prospect!

**The Case for Act Utilitarianism**

**1. *It focuses on happiness.***

By relying upon the Greatest Happiness Principle as the yardstick for measuring

moral behavior, utilitarianism fits the intuition of many people that the purpose of

life is to be happy.

**2. *It is practical****.*

The utilitarian calculus provides a straightforward way to determine the right

course of action to take. Start by identifying the set of possible alternatives. Next,

consider each of the alternatives in turn. For each alternative, total up the anticipated

positive and negative consequences to all of the affected parties resulting from

the action. Finally, identify the alternative with the maximum total. That alternative

is the right action to take. This process, conducted in a open manner in which all

the information is made available to all of the key stakeholders, is a good way for a

diverse group of people to come to a collective decision about a controversial topic.

For example, suppose your state needs to build a new prison because the number

of prisoners is growing. Everybody understands the prison must be built somewhere

in the state, but nobody wants the prison in their neighborhood. A panel of

trusted citizens consider a variety of siting options and, after a series of public hearings

to gather evidence, weighs the pluses and minuses of each location. At the end

of the process, the panel makes public the individual scores and grand totals and

recommends the site with the highest grand total. While some will be unhappy at

the prospect of a prison being built near their homes, an open and impartial process

can speed their acceptance of the decision.

**3. *It is comprehensive.***

Act utilitarianism allows the moral agent to take into account all the elements of a

particular situation. Do you remember the problem of having to decide what to say

about your mother’s awful haircut? Utilitarianism allows you to take into account

the emotional distress that telling the truth would cause to you and your mother.

That harm could tilt the balance toward telling your mother what she wants to hear.

**The Case against Act Utilitarianism**

**1. *When performing the utilitarian calculus, it is not clear where to draw the line, yet***

***where we draw the line can change the outcome of our evaluation.***

In order to perform our calculation of total net happiness produced by an action, we

must determine whom to include in our calculation and how far into the future to

consider the consequences. In our highway example, we counted the people who

lost their homes and the people who would travel the new highway in the next

25 years. The proposed highway may cut neighborhoods in two, making it more

difficult for some children to get to school, but we did not factor in consequences

for neighbors. The highway may cause people to change their commutes, increasing

traffic congestion in other parts of town, but we did not count those people either.

The highway may be in existence more than 25 years, but we didn’t look beyond that

date. We cannot include all morally relevant beings for all time into the future. We

must draw the line somewhere. Deciding where to draw the line can be a difficult

problem.

**2. *It is not practical to put so much energy into every moral decision.***

Correctly performing the utilitarian calculus requires a great deal of time and effort.

It seems unrealistic that everyone would go to so much trouble every time they were

faced with a moral problem.

A response to this criticism is that act utilitarians are free to come up with moral

“rules of thumb.” For example, a moral rule of thumb might be, “It is wrong to

lie.” In most situations it will be obvious this is the right thing to do, even without

performing the complete utilitarian calculus. However, an act utilitarian always

reserves the right to go against the rule of thumb if particular circumstances should

warrant it. In these cases, the act utilitarian will perform a detailed analysis of the

consequences to determine the best course of action.

**3. *Act utilitarianism ignores our innate sense of duty.***

Utilitarianism seems to be at odds with how ordinary people make moral decisions.

People often act out of a sense of duty or obligation, yet the act utilitarian theory

gives no weight to these notions. Instead, all that matters are the consequences of

the action.

W. D. Ross gives the following example in his book ‘The Right and The Good’.

Suppose I’ve made a promise to A. If I keep my word, I will perform an action that

produces 1,000 units of good for him. If I break my promise, I will be able to perform

an action that produces 1,001 units of good for B. According to act utilitarianism,

I ought to break my promise to A and produce 1,001 units of good for B. Yet most

people would say the right thing for me to do is keep my word.

Note that it does no good for an act utilitarian to come back and say that

the hard feelings caused by breaking my word to A will have a negative impact on

total happiness of −N units, because all I have to do is change the scenario so that

breaking my promise to A enables me to produce 1,001 + N units of good for B.

We’ve arrived at the same result: breaking my promise results in 1more unit of good

than keeping my word. The real issue is that utilitarianism forces us to reduce all

consequences to a positive or negative number. “Doing the right thing” has a value

that is difficult to quantify.

**4. *We cannot predict with certainty the consequences of an action.***

In doing the utilitarian calculus, we can identify possible consequences of an action,

but we may misjudge the certainty, intensity, and duration of these consequences.

The action may have other unforeseen consequences that we forget to include in our

calculation. These errors may cause us to choose the wrong course of action.

5. *Act utilitarianism is susceptible to the problem of moral luck.*

As we noted in the previous point, sometimes actions have unforeseen consequences.

Is it right for the moral worth of an action to depend solely on its consequences

when these consequences are not fully under the control of the moral

agent? This is called the **problem of moral luck**.

Suppose I hear that one of my aunts is in the hospital, and I send her a bouquet

of flowers. After the bouquet is delivered, she suffers a violent allergic reaction

to one of the exotic flowers in the floral arrangement, extending her stay in the

hospital. My gift gave my aunt a bad case of hives and a much larger hospital bill.

Since my action had far more negative consequences than positive consequences, an

act utilitarian would say my action was bad. That doesn’t seem fair.

While it is not perfect, act utilitarianism is an objective, rational ethical theory that

allows a person to explain why a particular action is right or wrong. It joins Kantianism

on our list of workable ethical theories, we can use to evaluate moral problems.

***Referrence:***

***Ethics for the Information Age by Michael J. Quinn***