

### **Is the right action the one the maximizes utility?**

The question on how to act and which action is morally right is a vital element of ethical philosophy. In this particular case, the method of choosing one's actions based on maximising happiness will be analysed. In this essay it will be proven that this method, formally known as Utilitarianism, while seeming most natural, logical and adequate in solving several issues in modern Western society, faces somewhat hidden issues thus making the answer to the question of whether the right action is the one that maximizes utility not so clear. The notion and meaning of the term "right" will be investigated, firstly, as well as the notion of morality itself and why it is necessary for general civilizations. Reasons, such as religion, convention and law, behind why we may find certain actions uncomfortable compared to others will also be analysed. This followed by how Utilitarianism may seem appealing as a method of conduct and finally the subtle ways in which Utilitarianism falls short shall be observed in order to prove the point of the unclarity that lies in ethical decisions.

Before providing any evidence for the benefits and drawbacks of Utilitarianism, it is appropriate to begin by introducing the concept itself. Firstly, utility is the abstract characteristic of a thing which translates to "benefit, advantage, pleasure, goodness or happiness." (Bentham, 1994:307) Therefore, the "Principle of Utility" (or Utilitarianism) is the concept of acting so that utility or pleasure are maximized in the situation and by association depleting the total amount of unhappiness or distress for all those involved (Rachels, 2003:102). To abide by the rules of the Principle of Utility is to live "an existence as free as possible from pain and as rich as possible in enjoyments." (Rachels, 2003:92) There are a few assumptions that are intrinsic in this principle. Firstly, that it is the consequence and repercussions of an action that is of importance (Williams, 1973:94). Secondly, that it is the level of utility that is taken into account above all else (Rachels, 2003:102). And lastly, that every individual's utility accounts for the same meaning that when one abides by the principle, one becomes "strictly impartial" to the individual's who may hold some kind of special place in that person's life (Rachels, 2003:102). Issues concerning these assumptions are made apparent further on. Now that the concept itself has been unpacked, another issue remains in defining the term "right."

The understanding of what is right for us is, at its most basic level, a situation in life which leaves us feeling the most comfortable or “produce[s] the most good.” (Rachels, 2003:103). The Utilitarian argues that the right option is always the one that creates “the greatest possible balance of happiness over unhappiness” and that, Hedonistically, “happiness is the one ultimate good” (Rachels, 2003:102-104). However, as will be proven, the option which seems to provide the most utility in a situation may not leave us feeling that it is always the right thing to do. This is because the majority of views concerning ethics in Western, modern society are based around certain religious, legal and conventional codes (Rachels, 2003:93). If one were to be honest about religion in Western society, one would conclude that Christianity and its ethics have a rather large influence on the way many individuals conduct decision-making in their lives (Smart, 1973:67). This implies that in certain areas of life such as the value of life and how to treat another human being (as well as animals), many individuals already have perceptions of the right action which would not lead to acting in such a way that maximizes happiness. On par with religion are the rules of the law which one is expected to live by. The consequences of disobeying any such rule have conditioned us perhaps to believe that because the outcome of if we break the rule is unpleasant for us then it is in fact wrong to act in any such way. However, if one were to consider the reason behind the creation of the law, that “it should promote the general welfare of all citizens,” then the leap towards Utilitarianism does not seem so large (Rachels, 2003:96). Regardless, where accepted conventions on how to approach certain aspects of life such as the killing of another human being or lying leave problems, Utilitarianism seems appealing and hence implies that the action that maximizes utility is the right action.

Concepts dealt with in the human experience which may seem very black and white and in which decisions seem very easy to make, when investigated more thoroughly, may not appear as clear-cut. We observe an example of one of the most obvious human understandings: that it is not right to kill another human being. In a situation where one person kills another for no gain or reason Utilitarianism seems most natural because barely any utility is being maximized or even achieved. However, if it is considered that perhaps in killing a person who is planning a mass genocide, for example, many other lives can be spared then whether or not the action is right becomes confusing. Another example would be euthanasia. This is the killing of another to relieve them of physical or mental suffering or by their demand and permission (Marker, 2006). In this sense, “killing... provide[s] an escape from [the] misery.” (Rachels, 2003:95). The said person may be completely innocent in their actions and therefore in the traditional sense it does not seem just to kill them and this is what makes us so uncomfortable with the situation (Rachels, 2003:94). However chose to let a person continue to live in such misery does not seem just either. The difference is, in the one way

the person is relieved of their pain through death without harming anyone else, perhaps emotionally but this should be disregarded in comparison to the misery, and in the other, they are forced to live a life of decreasing utility (Rachels, 2003:95). The euthanasia therefore appears to be the most ethical or right option and it abides by the ideals of Utilitarianism. In this way, the action that maximizes utility is the action which is right but is also the action which we are not the most comfortable with.

Returning to this point of why we think and react uncomfortably to certain situations the way we do, the question of individual morality itself and what purpose it holds surfaces. Morality may be perceived such that its purpose is to enforce that all acts are done with “benevolence” and concern for the needs of others and for oneself and simply “to subserve the general happiness” (Smart, 1973:68). It is obvious from this then to agree with the idea of law being created for the benefit of an entire community or society. The term “justice” becomes useful at this point but, as it will be proven, the idea of the right action being the one that maximizes utility becomes a problem when we consider this term. There are three issues which arise regarding the Utilitarian approach when considering this view of morality and hence affect the decision on whether or not an action is right purely if it maximizes happiness.

The first of these issues is such that happiness or utility seem to be the one thing of such great significance when surely it cannot always be so (Rachels, 2003:104). A problem is apparent here that may not appear so obvious at first. In assuming that an action makes us happy we are assuming it is good and hence the right action (Rachels, 2003:104). This is the logic that Utilitarianism would have us follow. Rather than an act being good, by standards of morality, because it makes us happy, it is more true that we are made happy by an act because it is good (Rachels, 2003:104). By this logic, the right act is not the one that results in the most happiness or pleasure directly but the one which is intrinsically good and by that path leads to utility anyway. This is a small issue but it is beneficial to have analysed it to better clarify the terms within the essay's question.

Another perhaps more important issue which is brought up upon analysing the assumptions of Utilitarianism is the question of whether it is only the consequences of acts which matter. This is where the term “justice” becomes significant and many elements of law are challenged. Firstly, the foundational concept of justice is vulnerable and allowed to be broken by Utilitarian standards (Eachels, 2003:106). This is because the choice which maximizes the benefit of a situation may seem to completely disregard any law which may normally have prohibited such an action (Rachels, 2003:106). In this sense, the idea of law being created around the idea of general maximization of utility for society is destroyed and furthermore, the already established concept of morality on

which law is generally based and which is the core of all ethical discussions. Along with foundational justice, the rights of any human being or animal may be equally violated in order for the utility of the majority to be maximized (Rachels, 2003:107). Lastly, the assumption that every individual's well-being is equal to the next creates problems for our human nature and relationships (Rachels, 2003:109). It does not naturally make sense for one to place the needs of a stranger and “concern for the general good” over the needs of a best friend or family member and in this sense the statement of the right action being the one that maximizes happiness is improbable and unrealistic (Williams, 1973:99).

In conclusion, the question of whether the right action is the one which maximizes happiness or utility is proven to have not such a clear or apparent answer. Due to already conditioned ways of perceiving justice and morality based on religion, legal aspects and basic convention, individuals may find the act which in fact does allow for the most utility rather uncomfortable and not the decision they would naturally make. However, it has been proven that this Utilitarian view in certain circumstances holds great value and then does provide an answer for what is the right action, like in the case of euthanasia, but it has also been proven to be unrealistic in its approach and does not seem to give much leeway for human tendencies, like personal and intimate human relationships or a person's basic human rights. It is therefore concluded that Utilitarianism does not always provide the answer on which action should be undertaken and choosing to act in such a way that maximizes utility may be perfectly appropriate and hence right in some cases and in other cases not so appropriate.

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