

This Is Philosophy - Chapter 2 : 2.36

Summary

Utilitarianism (Is Morality Doing What I can to Make This the Best World Possible?)

Utilitarianism aims to address the problem of equal treatment that was presented in moral and cultural relativism.

"A moral theory that treats everyone equally, without prejudice to personal standing"

Focuses on the outcomes of actions.

"Provides an answer to every moral question ... [sometimes] not obvious, utilitarianism still provides the means to answer them."

Consequentialism and Hedonism

Consequentialism:

All that morally matters is the consequences of action.

From the perspective of morality, all that matters is what you actually did. To find out whether you did the right thing or the wrong thing, all we need to do is look at the consequences of your action.

"[The] thing you decide to do should be whatever has the best consequences."

and

"you have to consider the consequences for everyone affected by your action, not just now, but indefinitely into the future"

But, **consequentialism can't be correct**, there must be more to morality than just consequences alone.

Summum Bonum - a theory of the highest good or what the aim of morality really is.

Consequentialism + the highest good is pleasure = hedonistic utilitarianism

"[Y]ou should always do the best you can; whatever action will produce the best balance of pleasure over pain for everyone your action affects (including you)"

In the event no available options can produce pleasure:

"The utilitarian judgment is to choose the lesser of two evils"

Measuring Pains and Pleasures

Bentham's Felicific Calculus

1. Intensity:

How powerful or intense is the pleasure or pain? Some pleasures are mild, like a tasty apple. Some are great, like the joy of graduation, or a wedding. Some pains are mild, like a paper cut, others are strong, like a migraine headache.

2. Duration:

How long will the pain or pleasure last? Obviously, you want pains to be brief and pleasures to be long lasting.

3. Certainty or uncertainty:

How likely is it that the possible pain or pleasure that we're considering really will occur? An action with a high likelihood of pleasure to follow and a very low risk of pain looks like a better choice, all other things being equal, than an action with a low chance of pleasure and a high risk of pain. When you're playing cards, bet high on good hands.

4. Propinquity or remoteness:

How soon is the pain or pleasure? Is it going to happen right away, or is it years in the distance? The pleasures of education may be a long time coming—learning to play guitar is a slow process, and the joy of mastery is remote in time. The pleasure of an afternoon nap is imminent. The further away a sensation is, the more intervening factors there may be that prevent it, and so the less likely it is that it will ever happen.

5. Fecundity:

A sensation is fecund just in case it tends to be followed by the same type of sensation. For example, the pleasure of learning to read tends to lead to other pleasures, such as reading a good book. So the pleasure of learning to read is fecund. The pain of food poisoning often follows the unpleasantness of eating bad seafood, so the latter is a fecund pain. Clearly you would prefer your pleasures to be fecund and your pains not.

6. Purity:

A sensation is impure just in case it tends to be followed by the opposite type of sensation, otherwise it is pure. For example, drinking a lot of alcohol is an impure pleasure, since it tends to be followed by the pain of a hangover. Working out at the gym is an impure pain since it tends to be followed by the pleasure of fitness. So you should want your pleasures

to be pure and your pains impure.

7. Extent:

How many people will be affected by your action? To what extent will the pains or pleasures produced by your behavior spread out to other people? Those have to be taken into account and added up too.

Again, you needn't work through the felicific calculus every time you act. But it is there, waiting in the wings, for those problematic cases in which it's not obvious what the right action and the optimal consequences really are.

Quality and Quantity

Bentham:

"It is just pompous moralizing to declaim [that] pleasure is somehow superior in any way other than its amount."

As one becomes more informed and more expert about any subject—food, antiques, literature, tennis racquets, movies, travel, romantic trysts, jazz, or Platonic dialogues one gains a finer appreciation for the high end while losing the ability to be satisfied with the low end.

"The recognition of quality comes at a cost."

The Millian View:

"We should live our lives like Jane Pivo—we should become knowledgeable about various pleasures, pursuing and promoting them."

But:

"The appreciation of high quality pleasures is certainly worthwhile when the cost of gaining those pleasures is low."

Summary Example:

"There is no point in loading up on the Jell-O with mini marshmallows when one could

have the lobster instead."

Objections to Utilitarianism

Objection 1: Practicality

It's not feasible to always do the most moral thing in the eyes of Utilitarianism.

We could make an educated guess or a decent calculation for the short term, but there is no way that we can predict all of the outcomes of our actions to the end of time, which is what the theory demands.

"If we don't know the ultimate result of a butterfly flapping its wings on the opposite side of the world, how can you possibly know whether some action will eventually lead to more pleasure than pain, or vice versa?"

All we can do is the best we can; we have no control over the final consequences of our actions.

Objection 2: Invasiveness

Under **Utilitarianism**, morality is just too invasive. Now every single aspect of our lives has moral weight.

"Whether you take out the garbage before or after dinner is now a moral issue. What you have for breakfast is laden with moral choices. You probably have a moral duty to get out on one side of the bed rather than the other."

Every action has moral properties like every object has mass.

Utilitarianism shouldn't be seen as invasive, but merely comprehensive.

Objection 3: Supererogation

Supererogation: actions that are good actions, but greater than what duty requires.

Utilitarians don't deny that, strictly speaking, there are no supererogatory acts.

Just because there are no supererogatory actions, does not mean that there are no morally heroic actions. There might be situations in which you're a hero just for doing your duty.

Objection 4: Simpson's Paradox

Simpson's Paradox when a set can be partitioned into subsets that each have a property opposite to that of the superset.

"In the 2009 Wimbledon finals, Roger Federer beat Andy Roddick by a score of 5-7, 7-6 (8-6), 7-6 (7-5), 3-6, 16-14. Even though Roddick won most of the games (39 versus Federer's 38), he still lost the match."

We may be obligated to make every person alive less happy, because it will increase the total global amount of happiness.

Objection 5: Agent-Relative Intuitions

Addressing the *Drowning Swimmers* (you son and other kid) and *A Friend in Need* (Give money to charity that helps many or your one friend) moral instances.

"A utilitarian faced with the drowning swimmers case might choose his or her own child, but would have no obligation to do so. Or perhaps the utilitarian might decide that flipping a coin is the fairest way to decide who gets to live and who dies in that instance. The friend in need would just plain be out of luck. The distant charity should get the money."

"If you're inclined to think that those actions are not what you should do, then you might doubt that utilitarianism is the correct moral theory."

Objection 6: Nothing is Absolutely Wrong

Under **Utilitarianism** there is no act so heinous, so terrible, that it is utterly unconscionable.

In the case of *The Organ Robber* - murdering an innocent man to use his organ to save 10 others.

"If you think that murdering an innocent person in order to cut them up and steal their body parts is wrong, no matter what good may come of it, then that is a reason to reject utilitarianism."