**Module 3: Act Utilitarianism**

Brady Chin

Colorado State University Global

CSC502-1: Ethical Leadership in Software Development

Dr. Dong Nguyen

September 29th, 2024

**Act Utilitarianism**

Utilitarianism is the ethical theory that suggests whether actions are morally right or wrong depending on their effects. In other words, the effects or actions that are relevant are the good and bad results that they produce. Act utilitarianism focuses on the individual actions and states that the morally correct action is the one that maximizes happiness and minimizes suffering (Nathanson, S., 2024).

With respect to software engineering, act utilitarianism can be a guide for evaluating devisions in ethical dilemmas between different stakeholders. A common example would be the trolley problem (Coulson, J., 2024). The act utilitarianism approach would be to flip the switch and save five people because by doing this, less people will be harmed. While this is just a thought experiment, it emphasizes the outcomes of individual choices which makes it relevant in software engineering where ethical dilemmas arise frequently.

**User Privacy and Data Utilization**

An ethical issue in the field of software engineering that has become particularly relevant over the last several years is the collection of user data to improve software functionality. Software applications in fields like healthcare and the automotive industry rely on user data to provide personalized care, improve algorithms, and further the development of their software which can lead to privacy violations.

In this case, software engineers will have to consider the consequences of their actions. By using the data that is collected, software engineers can develop more sophisticated programs to give future users a better experience. The act utilitarian approach would be to determine if the overall benefit would be worth sacrificing users privacy.

The goal of increasing happiness in the largest group possible may sound good, but it leads to more complicated scenarios. Act utilitarianism can result in minority groups being overlooked so that the majority can benefit.

**Software Patents**

Software patents can cause ethical dilemmas in software engineering as it hinders innovation. By granting exclusive rights to its developers, it prevents others from using their production without permission which restricts access to tools and ideas.

The decision to enforce a patent would benefit the original inventor but it would create barriers for all other developers who wish to use the same techniques. The overall impact of the patent needs to be evaluated but in most cases, from an act utilitarian perspective, the patent should not be followed so that the software development community can benefit rather that the individual inventor.

**My Opinion**

In most situations, I would choose to follow the act utilitarian decisions to help the largest amount of people. I also think that it’s helpful to plan ahead and consider all consequences for actions that will be taken. However, I would continue to consider all scenarios before I make any decisions. I believe that focusing on “maximizing overall happiness” is a fairly board term and if this is followed to strictly, it can cause harm by not considering the minorities point of view.

Finally, a concern with act utilitarianism is that it can conflict with ACM Code of Ethics. ACM Code of Ethics focus on fairness and utility (ACM Code 2018 Task Force, 2018, June 22nd) which can be overlooked by act utilitarianism principles such as maximizing happiness.

**Conclusion**

In the software engineering profession, ethical dilemmas can arise in any project. Act utilitarianism offers guidelines by considering the consequences of each action and choosing the outcome that results in maximizing benefits and minimizing harm.

**References**

ACM Code 2018 Task Force (June 22, 2018) *ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct.*

Association for Computing Machinery.

<https://www.acm.org/code-of-ethics>

Coulson, J. (2024) *Act Utilitarianism.* Highbrow.

<https://gohighbrow.com/act-utilitarianism/>

Nathanson, S. (2024) *Act and Rule Utilitarianism.* Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<https://iep.utm.edu/util-a-r/>