

Rule utilitarianism

This handout follows the one on 'Utilitarianism'. You should read that handout first.

RULE UTILITARIANISM

Rule utilitarianism claims that an action is right if, and only if, it complies with those rules which, if everybody followed them, would lead to the greatest happiness (compared to any other set of rules). Rather than considering actions individually in relation to whether they create the greatest happiness, we need to take the bigger picture. Morality should be understood as a set of rules. The aim of these rules is to maximise happiness. Actions are right when they follow a rule that maximises happiness overall - even when the action itself doesn't maximise happiness in this particular situation.

ADVANTAGES OVER ACT UTILITARIANISM

Rule utilitarians argue that this theory has a number of advantages over act utilitarianism. (For discussion of how act utilitarians respond to these objections, see the handout on 'Utilitarianism: Objections'.)

Problems with calculation

Act utilitarianism seems to offer a clear and straightforward way of discovering what is right and wrong. We need to consider how much pleasure and pain (or preference satisfaction) an action will cause. But is it possible to work out the consequences of an action for human happiness? How can we know or work out the consequences of an action, to discover whether it maximises happiness or not? Surely this will be too difficult and too time-consuming for us to do.

But according to rule utilitarianism, we don't have to work out the consequences of each act in turn to see if it is right. We need to work out which rules create the greatest happiness, but we only need to do this once, and we can do it together. This is what Mill says human beings have done over time, giving us our customary moral rules ('secondary principles'). Rule utilitarianism gives rules a *formal* place in its theory of whether an action is right.

Individual liberty and rights

A second criticism of act utilitarianism is that no type of action is ruled out, in principle, as immoral. For example, if torturing a child produces the greatest happiness, then it is right to torture a child.

But according to rule utilitarianism, a rule forbidding torture of children will clearly cause more happiness if everyone followed it than a rule allowing torture of children. So it is wrong to torture children. More generally, individuals have rights, which are rules, because if people have to follow these rules (respect people's rights), that leads to the greatest happiness.

The moral status of particular relationships

Many of the things that we do to make people happy are aimed at *specific* other people, our family and friends. We do them favours, buy them presents, generally spend our time and money on them. But act utilitarianism argues that in our decisions, we need to consider the *greatest* happiness that our actions could create. So shouldn't we spend much less time with the particular people we love and more time helping people who need help, e.g. through voluntary work, and likewise spend less money on the people we love and much more money giving to charity? We can object that this is too idealistic, expecting people to give priority to needy strangers over those they know and love. Or more strongly, it is morally right and good (or at least, not morally wrong) to show partiality towards those people one knows and loves.

Rule utilitarianism can explain this. A rule that allows partiality to our family and friends will create more happiness than a rule that requires us to be impartial all the time. This secures the moral importance of such relationships - they are necessary to happiness. Of course, we shouldn't be completely partial. We still need to consider the general happiness, but we only need to act in such a way that, *if everyone acted like that*, would promote the greatest happiness. In the case of charity, I only need to give as much to charity as would be a 'fair share' of the amount needed to really help other people.

OBJECTIONS

Act utilitarians object that rule utilitarianism amounts to 'rule fetishism'. The point of the rules is to bring about the greatest happiness. If we only give as much to charity as we would need to if everyone gave to charity, then many people will not be helped, because not everyone will give what they should to charity. Surely, knowing this, I ought to give much more to charity; spending the money on myself would not be right. Or again, if I know that e.g. lying in a particular situation will produce more happiness than telling the truth, it seems pointless to tell the truth, causing unhappiness. The whole point of the rule was to bring about happiness, so there should be an exception to the rule in this case.

Rule utilitarians could respond by saying that we should amend the rule. However, life is complicated. *Whenever* a particular action causes more happiness by breaking the rule than by following it, we should do that action. If we try to add all the possible amendments to the rule 'don't lie' in order to make it always produce the greatest happiness, the rule will be impossibly long and we would lose any supposed benefits of rule utilitarianism. If we are going to be utilitarians, we should go back to act

utilitarianism. What matters is the greatest happiness, and this is what makes an action right.

A better response from rule utilitarianism is to focus on the long term. If people tried to follow act utilitarianism, this will lead to less happiness in the long term. For instance, people will no longer feel secure in their rights and there will be pressure on personal relationships to be given up in favour of impartiality. We may have to give up some happiness here and now to be more certain of the greatest happiness overall. Following rules provides this certainty.

Another objection is this: can all of morality be summed up by rules? Isn't life too complicated for this? If so, we will need a different theory to explain what the right thing to do is when there are no rules that apply.

The rule utilitarian has a simple answer to this objection, though we can question whether it is adequate. One of the rules is 'When no other rules apply, do that action that maximises happiness'.

Rule utilitarianism faces a number of other objections in virtue of being a form of utilitarianism:

1. Is happiness the only thing that is valuable?
2. How should we understand the motive to 'do good'? Will a rule utilitarian want to follow the rule for its own sake or because it leads to the greatest happiness? Or can we defend something like Mill's solution, and argue that following moral rules *becomes part* of happiness?
3. Can rule utilitarianism recognise the importance of good character traits? Are character traits just motives to follow certain rules?
4. Can rule utilitarianism explain the moral value of particular relationships? For instance, if I form friendships because this maximises happiness, does that respect and value my friends for themselves, as the particular people they are?