

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a concept in philosophy, articulated by Bentham and Mill, where an actor makes a choice to maximize total pleasure and minimize total pain. In this essay I will explain some aspects of utilitarianism that I personally find appealing or unappealing and explain why I believe utilitarianism is a compelling framework for moral decision making. I will also explain the Expediency Objection and the Standard Too High Objection; I will take these objections and give reasoning on how they can be resolved. I will also examine the Repugnant Conclusion, and some of the ways to mitigate the distress this conclusion causes. I believe that although Utilitarianism has its challenges and limitations, it should not be abandoned as a theory and should instead be utilized as a reasonable ethical framework.

Mill (1863, p.5) defines utilitarianism as, “the doctrine that the basis of morals is utility, or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong in proportion as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.” Mill continues to explain the idea of higher and lower pleasures; the idea that a being of a higher order can experience more nuanced pleasures and would not consent to being in a lower order after they have experienced the higher order. Mill (p. 6) writes, “no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool”, “no educated person would prefer to be an ignoramus”, and “no person of feeling and conscience would rather be selfish and base.” This refinement deepens our understanding of Utilitarianism by adding the quantifier that it is not just the amount of happiness or pleasure that is provided by an action, the quality of the pleasure is just as, or even more important.

I find the concept of utilitarianism very compelling. Primarily, I like thinking of utility in a mathematical sense. The idea that there is some quasi-numerical value associated with the “goodness” of the action suggests that all moral questions, at least in principle, have a rational answer. This gives structure and clarity to a concept that can be very subjective. Another compelling aspect of utilitarianism is that utility allows for the actor to include relevant personal influences in their decision making. Furthermore, I like the idea of maximizing overall pleasure. I think choosing actions in such a way that it leads to happiness for most people is something that makes intuitive sense. Focusing on well-being on a broad scale aligns with my personal sense that morality should improve life for as many people as possible (Mill, 1863, pp.15-16).

A major objection to Utilitarianism is the Expediency objection. This objection generally states that it is unreasonable to try to do the mental calculus to decide if an action has a net positive result. If this mental calculus is considered to be unreasonable, utilitarianism should be disregarded. However, there are a few ways to avoid this problem. Mill (1863, pp. 15-16) emphasizes the idea that a person can act on the lessons they have learned before and use their experience to pick the option that promotes happiness. In class we discussed the formalization of this principle, known as rule utilitarianism. In rule utilitarianism, a person will act in accordance with a set of rules in order to maximize utility overall, even if they do not maximize utility in that individual circumstance. This gives the actor a general framework to follow, and while they may deviate from the rules in extreme, extenuating circumstances, they can oftentimes follow the rule and produce a net positive outcome over all the times they follow the rule.

Another major objection to Utilitarianism is the Standard Too High Objection. This objection argues that Utilitarianism is too demanding on moral agents; this argument is rooted in the reasoning that every action must maximize happiness for all people. Mill (1863, p. 12) argues against this objection by clarifying that this is not what Utilitarianism expects of its actors. Mill says that Utilitarianism does not require that each action contributes to the greater good, but instead that Utilitarianism requires a person's action to have a tendency to produce good outcomes. This theory asks for a trend-line towards positive action instead of a ruthless commitment to always acting in the best interests of everyone. As discussed in class, modern utilitarians have also emphasized the idea that it is okay for an actor to aim for a "good enough" outcome, again as long as the general trend of the outcomes of their actions is positive.

A serious detriment to the appeal of utilitarianism is the repugnant conclusion. This conclusion, as discussed in class and attributed to Derek Parfit (1984) is a result of utility being considered in aggregate and only in aggregate. The idea is that a world with billions of people living lives so low in pleasure that they are barely worth living could have a greater overall utility than a world with few lives that are filled with pleasure. Mill's distinctions between higher and lower pleasures, as discussed earlier in this paper, can help to remedy this conclusion by emphasizing quality of life. Even with the consideration of higher and lower pleasures this conclusion is truly repugnant, and I believe it serves as a warning against taking any philosophical idea too far.

Even with these issues, I believe Utilitarianism is still a useful moral theory that should not be abandoned. The focus of encouraging people to consider the real-world consequences of

their actions and generally trend towards positive actions is a concept that resonates with me. The guidance of rules utilitarianism also helps to mitigate many weaknesses associated with utilitarianism. Following the general moral rules can help to maximize happiness overall, even if special circumstances require exceptions to the rules. The combination of rationality and compassion that utilitarianism provides is very appealing and aligns with many of the things I personally prioritize in morality.

Bibliography

Mill, J. S. (1863). *Utilitarianism* (pp. 1-17).