

Utilitarian Theory

Utilitarian Theory, also known as ethical universalism, is similar to Divine Command Theory in that it supports the idea of promoting the pursuit of the greatest good as the ethical goal for individuals. Indeed, the goals include reducing the amount of evil so that the greater good can be achieved. In the presence of a dilemma, alternative choices are available to make a decision. Facing this dilemma, individuals will ideally select the alternative that will result in the greatest good over evil. (Frankena, 1973, 16) Like teleological theory, utilitarian theory embraces utilitarians who are hedonists or non-hedonists. However, unlike teleological theory, utilitarian theory allows ambiguity, in that a middle ground between hedonism and non-hedonism can be reached. This area of utilitarianism is considered to be the intermediate theory. (Frankena, 1973, 16) This intermediate theory allows for more consideration of what the greatest good actually is. While hedonistic utilitarians emphasize that ethical conduct is concerned with achieving a greater amount of pleasure and ideal utilitarians hold that there are higher morals than simply pleasure, those who subscribe to intermediate theory desire to achieve greater good for a group, such as family or nation. (Frankena, 1973, 16) Within utilitarian theory, are additional theories including act-utilitarianism, rule-utilitarianism, and trait-utilitarianism. These sub-theories are similar in that they promote the idea of achieving the greatest good over evil. With act-utilitarianism, individuals must, in a manner similar to teleological theory, consider the consequences of actions in the pursuit of the greatest good. Rule-utilitarianism focuses on using rules as the basis for attaining the greatest good. The idea with rule-utilitarianism is to decide which rules will be most useful in achieving this goal. (Frankena, 1973, 39) The idea of trait-utilitarianism supports the

promotion of values or traits that are for the greatest good over evil. These values are held as examples for individuals to follow. Among all the ideas of utilitarian theory is the idea of ethical altruism, which holds that individuals should be most concerned with advancing the greatest good of other people in various situations. (Frankena, 1973, 16)

Case #1 of the Warner case studies focuses on the problem of nepotism and how it affects many individuals and an entire corporation. If utilitarian theory served as a guide, then the greatest good in this situation would be to provide advice and act in a nature that prevented this nepotism from happening. Chauncey is clearly unqualified for the job. Putting him in an important position would be detrimental to the corporation, as indicated by the writer. Opposing Chauncey's promotion would be more precisely in the realm of ideal utilitarianism, or teleological theory. The writer knows that the consequences of promotion are definitely not for the greatest good. The ethical action would be that which achieves the greatest good in the end.

Among the Warner case studies, Case #4 involves John the soldier controlling the bucket of water. If John were to make an ethical decision along the lines of utilitarian theory, he would take initiative to pursue the greatest good for everyone. In this case, the greatest good for have John drinking some water and also share sharing some water with the other soldiers. John's current line of reasoning has him consuming all of the water since he was able to get the bucket. He might consider this action to be in his own best interest, which is not reasoning according to utilitarian theory. Ethical egoism is more of the philosophy under which John is operating. Arguably, the greatest good might be for John to give all the water to other soldiers. However, doing such would leave John without any water for himself, and this action would not be for the greatest good.

In Case #5 of the Warner case studies, the prosecuting attorney faces the dilemma of whether or not to disclose key evidence. The key evidence is the difference in either exonerating the suspect or putting him in prison. Operating under utilitarian theory, the attorney should decide to pursue the greatest good over evil. In this case, removing the suspect from society would prevent him from harming other people. Such an outcome is definitely the greatest good over evil. By using utilitarian theory, the attorney would recognize that it would be unethical to reveal the evidence, as that would allow the suspect to avoid prison.

Utilitarian theory involves the moral choice of achieving the greatest good over evil in the universe. What does the greatest good really mean? Does it mean the greatest good for everyone involved in a situation? Does it mean the greatest good for one person or a group? The other problem is: who gets to determine the greatest good? Economically, life consists of tradeoffs between various choices, because resources possess the quality of scarcity. It's not possible to achieve the greatest good for everyone involved in situations at all times. The greatest good has to be defined by a condition that certain people will be benefiting by a decision. Politicians, judges, and legislators are tasked with making decisions about the greatest good for society. Often, however, specific groups benefit while others don't, or certain groups benefit at the expense of other groups. Programs such as Social Security, welfare, and Medicare were started with the intention of benefitting everyone, but these programs have been abused by many. They have also been taxing on many people. Trying to achieve the greatest good, or being utilitarian, can be good but it can also be controversial and dangerous.

References

Warner, Douglas W. The Basis for Ethical Conduct/Ethics for Decision-Making Case Studies. 5th ed. 1984.

Frankena, William K. Ethics. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973.