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**Utilitarianism**

Utilitarianism is a moral theory within the study of Ethics. In this paper I will define what utilitarianism is, explain the beliefs, and the different interpretations of utilitarianism, and state and explain the problems with utilitarianism. Finally I will state my personal beliefs on the theory.

Utilitarianism was created by Jeremy Bentham and enhanced upon by John Stuart Mill. Mill stated that the principle of utility is that “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”(MacKinnon, Fiala 95) By the principle of utility morality can be stated in mathematical terms by what produces the most happiness for the most amount of people.

By putting morality in a mathematical light many problems that other moral theories have troubles solving can, instead, more easily be taken care of by utilitarianism. One such example would be the problem of whether we should allow euthanasia to terminally ill patients. Let’s consider a man who is in pain, terminally ill and is slowly increasing in pain each day he is alive and wants to euthanise himself. We can consider his current pain a -10 to happiness and a -0.1 happiness over time that he is alive. He has a family(f) that is glad that the man is alive(+2 happiness) but is concerned that he is in pain(-1 happiness). This creates a math equation of -10-.1t+f(2-1)=(h)appiness. Through an equation like this we can see that over a long enough period of time the man should be allowed to euthanise himself as his pain will overtake the happiness generated by any number of family members he can have.

The euthanasia example above is an example of utilitarianism, but only one of the two forms of utility. Given above we have an example of rule utilitarianism which states that one should ask whether it would be morally acceptable for everyone put into your situation to commit the same act you do. In the euthanasia example, before committing yourself to euthanasia, you should ask if it would create more happiness in every terminally ill patient’s death than would be created in life. By dying one removes oneself from the unhappiness pool and plunges the family in temporarily due to grief. Over time though the family will move on and the overall happiness of the greater population of the area will increase, thus, euthanasia is the morally correct choice.

The other form of utilitarianism is called act utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism looks at only the happiness consequences of specific acts and not non-happiness related consequences of specific actions. Through act utilitarianism one can steal, cheat, or lie without looking at the further consequences beyond what happiness is created. One could steal from a friend to give to many homeless people, but the person would possibly lose the trust or friendship over the action itself.

Through the principle of utility utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory. That causes three of the four big problems with utilitarianism. The first problem can be shown in the example above about euthanasia. The man is unhappy with his life and the family is happy that he is alive. These things were given numerical values, but there is no way to actually quantify these values as they are subjective to the experience of the person. Pain and the love of a family toward a person are completely subjective and can’t easily be given a value due to the subjectivity.

The second big problem with utilitarianism is the fact that it removes one’s self from a problem. Through the theory we come into problems where one may have to choose between saving family vs saving someone who is unrelated to us. In an example one may have their mother and a complete stranger choking on the smoke from the flames in a burning building. The person can only choose one person, and one is their mother, an old lady, and a young person. Through utility the person should save the young person as they have more opportunities to create happiness in their life than an old lady nearing the end of their life. This runs contrary to common sense where a person would save their family member due to love and their relationship rather than worrying about the happiness of others.

Third we run into the problem of actions. This problem states that actions that can seem morally unjust can be justified because their consequences create happiness. An example of this is the 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis when over 700 people were taken hostage by 40 terrorists. At the time the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, or KGB, filtered gas into the theater, killing 133 hostages and all 40 terrorists. By doing this the KGB possibly saved the lives of a lot more hostages and Russian police forces, but in the incident 133 innocent people were killed. Through utilitarianism the act of killing 133 innocents is justifiable due to the possibility that the terrorists could have taken more lives than the gas did. The loss of these extra lives would have created more unhappiness, and therefore the gas was a justified act. This is a problem because the KGB could have used less lethal means to subdue the terrorists and ended the act with less casualties, and thus, increased happiness overall.

Now we move on to my personal beliefs about the theory of utilitarianism. After hearing all the proposed moral theories in this class, and having some out of class thought on my personal beliefs, I believe utilitarianism is the best moral theory. I believe that utilitarianism is the best theory because it provides solutions for the survival of our planet and the survival of the human species in our universe. Through utilitarianism we are able to look past differences of culture, race, and religion, and move our species forward toward the goal of expanding ourselves off the planet Earth and into the cosmos so that we may survive as a species past the death of our sun. This is because through a utilitarian standpoint we wish to create a happier society that all humans can live in, not just in our generation, but through our descendant’s generations as well.

Without utilitarianism, and through other moral theories such as egoism and cultural relativism, we create divides in humanity. Unnatural boundaries such as nationalism and xenophobia that hinder our ability to come together to save our species from even such current crises’ as climate change. Without utilitarianism we focus on such trivial problems as border walls and the falling threat of terrorism, rather than things that propel us to a future our species can survive in. Immigrants will get into a country whether we have boundaries in the way or not. Usually these people are leaving situations that cause them unnecessary unhappiness and wish to leave for the prospect of future happiness for them and their children. In a similar vein terrorism will happen regardless of what any government tries to do to stop it, unless there is no reason to terrorise people due to most people being happy.

There are problems of thinking of utilitarianism on this scale though. Eventually this leads to the rule of the majority. This is when the majority of people think the same way and it leads to the oppression of minorities, because the majority believes their beliefs are wrong. This is a hard problem to solve though, and would have to be done through a different style of government than the current two party system of the United States. Minorities unhappy with the beliefs of the majority will need representation in government or we create a problem where the happiness of the majority may lead to the deaths of the majority as they try to hold onto power.

This is the belief of the theory of utilitarianism. I have explained the beliefs of utilitarianism, how it calculates happiness, and the problems of utility. I have also gone over my personal beliefs of utilitarianism and why I believe it is the best moral theory. Through the theory of utility we are provided a future for our species to live and be happy and we should pursue it as a goal for the survival of humanity.

**Works Cited**

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