

UTILITARIANISM: PROS AND CONS

B.M. Wooldridge

Consequentialism is a general moral theory that tells us that, in any given situation, we should perform those actions that lead to better overall consequences. There are generally two branches of Consequentialism:

- Hedonism, which tells us that the consequences we should pursue should be ‘pleasurable’ consequences, and
- Utilitarianism, which tells us that the consequences we should pursue should be ‘happy’ consequences.

The focus of this paper will be on Utilitarianism, as this is undoubtedly the most popular form of consequentialist theories. John Stuart Mill, one of the foremost Utilitarian moral theorists, sums up Utilitarianism as follows: “actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”¹

1. John Stuart Mill, “Utilitarianism,” In *Moral Philosophy: A Reader, Fourth Edition*,

Any account of Utilitarianism will have two central tenets. First, Utilitarians are focused on states of affairs, which means that Utilitarianism is concerned with the result, or consequences, of one's actions, and disregards other features like one's motives or reasons for acting. One might have good motives or reasons for performing a certain action, but an action is only considered morally good for a Utilitarian if it maximizes the consequences, or happiness, of a given situation. Secondly, Utilitarians emphasize that agents are to be neutral in making their decisions. What this means is that under Utilitarianism, everyone counts for the same, and nobody counts for more than anybody else. Friends, family members, significant others, and anyone else important to you counts just the same as a complete stranger when making a moral decision.

On the face of it, this seems like a sensible moral theory. Like any other theory, Utilitarianism has its advantages and disadvantages. In this paper, I will argue that the disadvantages of Utilitarianism far outweigh the advantages. More specifically, I will argue that, despite its initial appeal, there are serious problems with Utilitarianism that render it a problematic moral theory. In what follows, I will consider a thought experiment from Bernard Williams to highlight the

advantages and disadvantages of Utilitarianism, followed by a discussion of why Utilitarianism is a problematic moral theory.

To begin, consider the case of George. George has recently completed his PhD in Chemistry, and, like any other PhD candidate, finds it extremely difficult to land a job after completing his degree. George has a family, and his wife works hard to support them. While she is supportive of George, his difficulty finding a job puts a serious strain on their relationship. An older chemist who knows George tells George that he can get him a job in a laboratory. The laboratory pursues research into chemical and biological warfare. George, however, is opposed to chemical and biological warfare, and he therefore cannot accept the job. However, if George refuses the job, it will go to a colleague of George's who does not have any reservations about chemical and biological warfare. Indeed, if this colleague takes the job, he will pursue the research with great zeal. For what it's worth, George's wife is not against chemical and biological warfare. Should George take the job?²

It seems that a Utilitarian would inform us that George should take the job, for doing so will lead to better overall consequences than turning down the job. In taking the job, George will not perform the research with great enthusiasm. Williams is not clear on whether George will actively sabotage

2. Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, J.J.C. Smart & Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 98.

the research, but it can be reasonably assumed that if George takes the job, he will perform his duties in such a way that will minimize the impact that chemical and biological research will have on developing weapons for war. While George will not directly be saving anyone, his work will indirectly lead to the saving of thousands of lives. Indeed, simply taking the job will ensure that someone who has great enthusiasm for chemical and biological warfare does not get the job. So even if George does not directly or indirectly save anyone while performing his duties, he will already have maximized the consequences by preventing someone who would do great harm from getting the job.

This thought experiment is useful in considering the strengths and weaknesses of Utilitarianism. Let us first begin with the strengths of the theory. Perhaps the biggest strength of Utilitarianism is that it is, at least *prima facie*, easier to reach a conclusion under this theory than other theories. That is, Utilitarianism provides us with a clear path for determining which action in a given situation will be the correct one: it is that action that will increase utility. This is in contrast to other moral theories, such as Deontology, which do not always provide a clear answer. Deontology, for example, focuses on the motives or reasons one has for acting, and it can be difficult sometimes to ascertain what one's motives and/or reasons are. Even if one explicitly outlines their motives or reasons, it is not always the case that this is truthful. The consequences of an action, however, do provide us with a clear criterion for

what counts as a morally good action. If one's action leads to good, or happy, consequences, then that action is morally permissible. Thus, Utilitarianism is a theory that can easily help us reach decisions.

Relating this to the case of George, George's actions can be judged on whether they will lead to better consequences. In this case, his action will lead to good consequences, albeit indirectly. In accepting the job, George prevents someone else who might indirectly harm others by promoting chemical and biological warfare from getting the job. Consider, for a moment, if we judged this action not on the consequences, but rather on the reasons or motives for acting. Suppose George accepts the job because he is motivated to end chemical and biological warfare, or that his reason for taking the job is to help support his family. While these reasons might be noble ones, we cannot be clear on whether these are actually the motives/reasons that George has. Motives and reasons, in other words, are not as clearly accessible as the consequences of an action.

Another strength of Utilitarianism is its emphasis on neutrality. When making a decision, one is to take a 'God's eye' view of things, and consider everyone equally. This emphasis on neutrality makes Utilitarianism an impartial moral theory, meaning it considers everyone's status and interests as equal. Relating this to the case of George, we see that George needs to assess the situation from a neutral perspective. He should not favour his or his family's interests as opposed to the interests

of others who might be impacted by chemical and biological warfare. Even if his wife and family were against chemical and biological warfare, and even considering that George himself is against chemical and biological warfare, he needs to put these interests and considerations aside and make the decision that is best for everyone involved.

While Utilitarianism does have its strengths as a theory, it also has some very serious weaknesses, and in the remainder of this paper I will outline of these weaknesses and argue why I think they make Utilitarianism a problematic moral theory.

We can begin by considering the point about neutrality. While Utilitarians will count this as a strength of their theory, it can also be considered a weakness of the theory. In considering everyone equally, Utilitarianism devalues the importance of personal relationships. In some cases, following Utilitarianism will force us to disregard those who are close to us. Suppose, for instance, that George's wife and children, like George, were also against chemical and biological warfare. Utilitarianism will tell us that George should disregard their interests and feelings and perform that action that will increase the consequences. But this seems to be impersonal. The interests, feelings, and desires of George's family should matter more than the interests, feelings, and desires of complete strangers, simply because these people are closer to George. Each of us has special relations to individuals that we work hard to develop, and that, in many cases, help us become better

people. To disregard the interests, feelings, and desires of these individuals seems to be wrong.

I should also point out here that while Utilitarians will *consider* everyone equally, this does not mean that they will *treat* everyone equally. Consider another example from Williams. Suppose that there is a racial minority in a society. This minority does not harm anyone else in the society, nor does it do anything particularly good either. However, the other citizens, who make up the majority, have prejudices against this minority, and consider its presence very disagreeable, and proposals are put forward to remove this minority.³ Williams is not clear on what would be involved in ‘removing’ the minority. The removal of the minority need not involve murder, although it could. It might involve, for example, removing them from society by forcing them to leave the society.

It seems that a Utilitarian would be forced to accept that eliminating this minority would increase the happiness for the majority of people, and would therefore be a moral action. But this seems wrong, mainly because removing the minority from society would involve what many people take to be morally evil actions, which is another problem with Utilitarianism. In some cases, Utilitarianism might sanction morally evil actions in order to achieve morally desirable consequences. Removing

3. Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” 105.

the minority might involve genocide or mass deportations, both of which seem morally problematic. Killing people simply because they are of a certain race or ethnicity, and/or removing them from a society without just cause, are severe moral violations that any reasonable person could not sanction. The idea here is this: sometimes, in working to achieve the greatest overall consequences, individuals will be forced to do bad things, and these bad things, even if they increase happiness, are still bad. And it is a failing of Utilitarianism that it does not recognize the moral value of labeling these as morally bad actions.

At this point a Utilitarian will surely have something to say. A Utilitarian might respond to the above points as follows. All of the critiques I have offered are focused only on the short-term consequences, and not the long-term consequences. When we focus on the long-term consequences of the above cases, the Utilitarian answer will change. For example, if George takes the job, this might lead to good consequences in the immediate future. But in the long run, it might lead to bad consequences. It might, for example, cause a serious strain on his marriage, and make George unhappy, which will in turn affect his relationships with others. In the racial minority case, while removing the minority might lead to better consequences in the short term, it will lead to worse consequences in the long term. It will, for example, weaken the trust among members of a community, and destabilize the social relations of individuals within that community. In

response to this, a Utilitarian might adopt a rule, the general following of which will lead to better long-term consequences. In so doing, a Utilitarian switches the focus from a version of Utilitarianism that is focused on acts, to one that is focused on rules.

This response from a Utilitarian fails, in that it invites more questions than what it does answers. Mainly, just how far into the future should we look when considering the consequences of our actions? Utilitarians do not provide a clear answer to this question. Saying that we should focus on the long-term consequences of an action when the implications of the short-term consequences are troubling seems to be problematic. And, moreover, should we really follow a rule when, in the moment, we can perform an act that will increase the happiness of others? Adopting rule-utilitarianism as a way to respond to these objections seems not only ad-hoc, but also inconsistent with the Utilitarian maxim of increasing the consequences.

Overall, the theory of Utilitarianism, while perhaps initially appealing, seems to have some serious flaws. While the theory of Utilitarianism might help us more easily reach moral conclusions than what other theories do, and while it emphasizes the neutrality of moral agents, it does nonetheless have a tendency to alienate us from those we are closest to, and might require us to perform actions that, under other moral theories, are considered morally problematic. It is for these reasons that Utilitarianism is a problematic moral theory.

For Reflection & Discussion

1. What are the benefits of Utilitarianism? Are these benefits enough to convince you that it is the correct moral theory we should follow?
2. What are the drawbacks of Utilitarianism? Are these benefits enough to convince you that it is an incorrect moral theory we should follow?
3. If more happiness is produced by *not* following Utilitarianism, is that what we should do? What does this say about the theory?

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