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Utilitarianism

A transplant surgeon finds herself in the distressing position of having four patients, all of whom are about to die through want of suitable organs (a liver, a heart and two kidneys). By chance a healthy student, on a work placement with the surgeon, happens to be a perfect donor for all the required organs. The surgeon sedates the student, removes the organs, and carries out the transplant operations, thereby saving the four patients.

Many of today's philosophers argue that morality should be based on consequentialist grounds: the question of whether our actions are right or wrong should be decided by considering the consequences of those actions. Utilitarianism, the most influential of consequentialist theories, is the more specific view that actions should be judged right or wrong to the extent that they increase or decrease general well-being or 'utility'.

On the face of it, the transplant scenario looks as if it results in a net gain in human well-being. Assuming that all the parties concerned are equally content with life, have similar prospects for happiness, and so on, four valuable lives have apparently been preserved at the cost of one such life. So, on utilitarian grounds, it appears that the surgeon has done the right thing. Yet almost everybody would agree that her behaviour is indefensible. On the face of it, an ethical theory that produces conclusions that run counter to virtually everyone's intuitions looks like a bad theory. So what exactly is utilitarianism and how does it cope with scenarios like this?

Timeline

18th century

Jeremy Bentham lays the foundations of classical utilitarianism

1861

John Stuart Mill's essay *Utilitarianism* defends and elaborates Bentham's theory

CLASSICAL UTILITARIANISM

The roots of utilitarianism go back to the work of the radical philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. For him, utility lay solely in human pleasure or happiness, and his theory is sometimes summarized as the promotion of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. One of utilitarianism's chief attractions, in his view, was that it held out the promise of a rational and scientific basis on which policies about the legal structure and organization of society could be founded. To this end, he proposed a 'felicific calculus', according to which the different amounts of pleasure and pain produced by different actions could be measured and compared; the right action on a given occasion could then be determined by a (supposedly) simple process of addition and subtraction.

'BETTER TO BE SOCRATES DISSATISFIED'

Critics were quick to point out just how narrow a conception of morality Bentham had given. By supposing that life had no higher end than pleasure, he had apparently left out of the reckoning all sorts of things that we would normally count as inherently valuable, such as knowledge, love, honour, achievement and life itself. As his younger contemporary and fellow utilitarian John Stuart Mill put it, Bentham had produced 'a doctrine worthy only of swine'.

Mill was troubled by this criticism and sought to modify utilitarianism accordingly. While Bentham had allowed only two variables in measuring pleasure – duration and intensity – Mill introduced a third, quality, thereby creating a hierarchy of 'higher and lower pleasures'.

According to this distinction, some pleasures, such as those of the intellect and the arts, are by their nature more valuable than base physical ones, and

NATURE HAS PLACED MANKIND UNDER THE GOVERNANCE OF TWO SOVEREIGN MASTERS, PAIN AND PLEASURE. IT IS FOR THEM ALONE TO POINT OUT WHAT WE OUGHT TO DO.

Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1789

1970s

Peter Singer and others propose that satisfaction of desires or preferences is the proper measure of utility

1974

Robert Nozick's experience machine threatens the claim that pleasure alone is intrinsically good

The experience machine

Imagine an 'experience machine' that simulates a life in which all your fondest dreams and ambitions are realized. Once plugged into the machine, you will have no idea that you are plugged in and you will think that everything is real. 'Would you plug in?' asks the US philosopher Robert Nozick: would you exchange a real life of inevitable frustration and disappointment for a virtual existence of unalloyed pleasure and success? In spite of its obvious attractions, most people, Nozick supposes, would reject the offer. The reality of life, its *authenticity*, is important to us: we want to do certain things, not just experience the pleasure of doing them. Yet, if pleasure were the only thing that mattered, surely we would all gladly plug in. So there must be things apart from pleasure that we consider intrinsically valuable. But if this is so, then something must be wrong with utilitarianism, at least in its classical hedonistic (pleasure-based) formulation.

by giving them greater weight in the calculus of pleasure, Mill was able to conclude that it was 'better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied'.

THE COST OF COMPLEXITY

Mill's introduction of a complex concept of pleasure was made at some cost. His notion of different kinds of pleasure seems to require some criterion other than pleasure to tell them apart. If something other than pleasure is a constituent of Mill's idea of utility, it is questionable whether his theory remains strictly utilitarian at all.

Getting a more intuitive answer to the case of the transplant surgeon also requires some special pleading. A classical utilitarian might argue, perhaps, that sacrificing one student to save four patients actually represents a net *loss* of utility: the erosion of trust between patients and doctors caused by the latter habitually behaving in such a manner would cause more harm than good in the long run. But in the end, utilitarians have to bite the bullet and admit that, if it is clear that none of these bad things will happen and there will indeed be a net gain in utility, the surgeon should go ahead and carve up the student.

ACT AND RULE UTILITARIANS

These difficulties are reflected in a significant split that has occurred in Bentham and Mill's theory concerning the precise manner in which the utilitarian standard is to be applied to actions. So-called 'act' utilitarians require that each action is assessed directly in terms of its individual contribution to utility; 'rule' utilitarians, on the other hand, determine an appropriate course of action by reference to various sets of rules that will, if

generally followed, promote utility. For instance, killing innocent people as a rule decreases utility, even though it might appear to have beneficial short-term consequences, so carving up the student turns out to be wrong after all.

Applying rules in this way also helps to overcome the objection that utilitarianism is simply not practicable. If we have to do a precise auditing of the utility that results from every possible course of action before we do anything, we will usually end up doing nothing – and that won't generally be the right thing to do. But if we apply principles that are known, as a rule, to promote general well-being, we will usually do the right thing. We may know from past experience that overall utility is diminished by lying and stealing, for instance, and therefore that we should not lie or steal.

Rules may seem to be useful in such cases, but what if it is obvious that breaking a rule will increase overall well-being? What if telling a white lie, for instance, will clearly save innocent lives? None of the options available to the rule utilitarian is very attractive. She can stick to the rule about lying and knowingly bring about bad consequences; or she can break the rule and undermine her status as a rule utilitarian. The only other option, it seems, is to modify the rule in this case, but rules, adapted to suit a particular situation, are not really rules at all. They are bound to become increasingly complex and qualified, to the point where a rule-based system collapses into an act-based one.

Utilitarianism remains a highly influential approach to ethics. Many philosophers, attracted by its foursquare merits, continue to chisel away at it, ever hopeful of smoothing out its rougher edges. It is fair to say, however, that these edges stubbornly remain, and its many critics continue to suggest that the whole venture was misguided from the outset.

The condensed idea
The greatest happiness principle