

Act utilitarianism, partiality and integrity¹

In its simplest form, act utilitarianism is defined by three claims.

1. What is right? Actions are morally right or wrong depending on their consequences and nothing else. An act is right if it maximises what is good. This is ‘act consequentialism’.
2. What is good? The only thing that is good is happiness, understood as pleasure and the absence of pain. This is ‘hedonism’.
3. Who counts? No one’s happiness counts more than anyone else’s. This is a commitment to equality.

In this handout, we will look at three objections to act utilitarianism from partiality, integrity and intentions. For further objections, see the handouts ‘Happiness, pleasure and preferences’, ‘Utilitarianism, fairness and rights’ and ‘Utilitarianism: objections from calculation’.

PARTIALITY

Many of the things that we do to make people happy are aimed at specific other people, viz. our family and friends. We do them favours, buy them presents and generally spend our time and money on them. In other words, we are partial towards them. We are not impartial in how we treat everyone, we are not equally concerned with the happiness of everyone. But act utilitarianism argues that in our decisions, we need to consider the greatest happiness that our actions could create, and this requires us to consider the happiness of each person equally. In other words, we should be impartial.

So if act utilitarianism is right, it seems we should spend much less time with the particular people we love and more time helping people who need help, e.g. through voluntary work. Likewise, we should spend less money on the people we love and give much more money to charity. This would lead to greater happiness, because people who really need help will be made much more happy by the same amount of money or effort than people who don’t really need anything. But is this correct? Is it morally permissible to be partial or is impartiality always required of us?

There are different ways we can develop this conflict between utilitarianism and our natural partiality towards some people into an objection. For instance, we can argue that utilitarianism is too idealistic, expecting people to give priority to needy strangers over those they know and love, to be motivated by the general happiness, rather than the happiness of those they are close to. Or again, we can

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 234-40

argue that utilitarianism misses something morally important in counting each person equally. In the abstract, each person is equal, but to me, each person does not and should not count equally. It is morally right and good (or at least, not morally wrong) to show partiality towards those people one knows and loves.

One response, which Mill gives in *Utilitarianism*, is simply to say that there are very few opportunities any of us have to benefit people 'in general'. And so only considering and contributing to the happiness of a few people is absolutely fine, and utilitarianism does not require more. While impartiality is required in principle, in practice, we serve the greatest happiness by showing partiality. Utilitarianism is not too idealistic.

But there are two objections to this response. First, if it was true in Mill's day that people could not often benefit people 'in general', that no longer seems true today. There are many charities that work around the globe and welcome volunteer fund-raisers, and the news makes us continually aware of many different causes of suffering around the world. It is perfectly possible, therefore, to dedicate much of one's time and money to helping others 'in general', and there are many opportunities to do so. So it seems that utilitarianism does demand more impartiality than we usually show.

Second, Mill's response doesn't address the objection that utilitarianism simply fails to understand the moral importance of partiality. It is not just that partiality should be allowed. Here is an example from Michael Stocker. Suppose a woman visits a friend in hospital. The friend thanks her. She replies, 'It was nothing, I was just doing my duty, maximising the general happiness in the world'. The friend can feel upset - the visit isn't personal, it is just a means to create happiness. If some other action would have created more happiness, being completely impartial, the woman would have done that instead of visiting the friend. If the general happiness is the ultimate end that we should seek in our action, then we should think of our friendships as a way to maximise the general happiness. This doesn't seem right.

Or again, consider this example from Bernard Williams. Suppose a man is in a boating accident with both his wife and a stranger. Neither can swim, and he can only rescue one. We might think that he should simply rescue his wife. But if he thinks, 'Rescuing my wife will lead to greater happiness than rescuing the stranger', this seems to miss the particular importance that being married has, including its moral importance. The man has 'one thought too many', and we (and his wife!) can object to his way of thinking about what to do.

Friendship requires that the friend is valued as the individual person that they are, and that we act out of love for them. The partiality that we show towards our friends seems to rule out a utilitarian understanding of morality. Doing something for a friend is morally good, not wrong because it fails to be impartial, nor even just 'permitted' as a way of maximising happiness. Furthermore, attachments of love and friendship are central to our happiness, indeed to wanting to stay alive at all. But again, these attachments motivate actions that are not impartial between everyone's happiness. Utilitarianism fails to recognise the moral importance of partiality.

Some utilitarians have replied that morality does require us to be impartial and so it is just much more demanding than we like to think. Can you defend spending money on your friends, rather than helping others through charity, when much of the world is in poverty or at war? Rather than objecting to utilitarianism, we should side with utilitarianism in objecting to our usual, partial morality.

A different response is to say that in making the objection, we are considering utilitarianism in the wrong way. People have learned that having partial relationships is central to happiness, and so it does not maximise happiness to require people to give them up in favour of promoting the general happiness all the time.

We may object that this response gives up on act utilitarianism. Instead, it appeals to general rules about living, and considering which of these rules would maximise happiness. And this is rule utilitarianism.

MORAL INTEGRITY

Having integrity involves acting according to your own values, sticking to them especially in the face of temptation or other situations that would make it easier to do something you consider wrong. Just as our actions are guided by our concern for particular other people (partiality), they are also guided by our values. But just as utilitarianism appears to require us to set aside our partiality, it can also seem to require that we set our moral values in order to maximise happiness. In other words, utilitarianism attacks our moral integrity.

Bernard Williams gives the following example in *Utilitarianism*. Imagine George, who has just completed his PhD in chemistry and is looking for a job. He isn't having much luck, and with only his wife working and small children to look after, the situation is causing a lot of stress. This is having a damaging effect on everyone, but especially the children. An older chemist says he can get George a job in a laboratory that does research developing chemical weapons. George is strongly opposed to chemical warfare and so wants to refuse the job. But his colleague points out that refusing the job will simply leave the vacancy for someone else, someone who will pursue the research with enthusiasm and so develop more chemical weapons faster and more effectively than George will.

Utilitarianism says that George should take the job. Suppose we add to Williams' example, and say that George not only has scruples about chemical weapons, he went into chemistry in order to develop ways of counteracting chemical weapons. He came to this decision after travelling abroad, during which time he came across an awful scene in a village that had suffered a chemical attack. All this makes little difference to utilitarianism. That George would be made unhappy by taking the job is already taken into account in calculating the greatest happiness; his unhappiness in acting against his moral values is outweighed by the prevention of significant unhappiness to others.

Utilitarianism requires George to take a value he holds dear, a commitment he has made, one that bestows meaning on his life for him, and treat it as simply one

preference among others because of the situation he finds himself in. It sees the situation this way: if George refuses to take the job, a consequence of his action will be that someone else will bring about significant harm (in chemical weapons research) that George can prevent by taking the job, and so George should take the job.

But can it make sense to think about George and how he chooses to live his life in this way? Why should George be responsible for what someone else does? Williams comments that

It is absurd to demand... that he should just step aside from his own project... and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires. It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions... It is thus... an attack on his integrity.

For each us, our relation to what we each do is special. I am not responsible for what you do in the same way that I am responsible for what I do. But, if what you do is a consequence of what I do, utilitarianism treats them both the same. It doesn't respect the way that my actions are expressions of who I am and the values I hold. Utilitarianism cannot understand or respect integrity.

A utilitarian such as Mill could respond that integrity is central to happiness. It doesn't maximise happiness to require people to act against their integrity. But we may repeat that in this response, the utilitarian gives up on act utilitarianism and appeals to a rule.

INTENTIONS

Act utilitarianism claims that an action is right if it leads to the greatest happiness. It does not, therefore, recognise the moral value of our intentions in acting as we do. We could capture this point by saying 'it is the thought that counts'. Whether someone intends to harm us or not - whether or not they do harm us - makes a big difference to how we respond to their action. Trying to harm someone and failing - so they are unharmed - is (usually) still blameworthy; trying not to harm someone and failing - so they are accidentally harmed - is not. But how can this be if all that matters are consequences, not intentions?

Mill discusses these points briefly in *Utilitarianism*. It is correct to say that utilitarianism considers people's intentions as irrelevant to whether the action is morally right or not. However, that does not mean that it thinks intentions have nothing at all to do with morality. They are relevant when considering whether someone is a morally good person. And a utilitarian can say that an intention that tends to produce morally wrong actions, such as intending to harm someone, is itself a bad intention, while intentions to produce happiness are good intentions. But we need to separate the judgment of whether an action was right or wrong from the judgment of whether the intention was good or bad.

Good intentions can contribute to the greatest happiness in another way. Having good intentions one of the 'ingredients' of happiness. Mill argues that the desire to do good is one of those things that is desirable (good) for its own sake. For people

who desire to do good because it is good, it is part of their happiness that they have this motive. Doing good is, in itself, pleasant to them. If we desire to do good, and nothing prevents us, then we also intend to do good. So good intentions are also part of a good person's happiness. For the utilitarian, this is the best possible psychology to have. What is good is maximising happiness, and here is someone who aims at and gets happiness from maximising happiness - what could be happier!

Is Mill's response adequate? The objection was that someone's intentions make a moral difference to their action, e.g. that an action can be wrong because of the individual's intentions, whatever the consequences of the action. Mill continues to deny this, and claims it only makes a moral difference to how we evaluate them as a person. Suppose someone lied to you but you saw through it - would you only think that they were a bad person or would you also think that they had done something wrong? Or again, suppose two scientists develop a genetically modified disease. One does so in order to kill people and deliberately releases it in a crowded city, wreaking havoc. The other does so in order to understand how the disease works, and takes many precautions to prevent the modified disease from escaping. But it does escape, in a crowded city, wreaking havoc. Did both scientists do equally wrong actions, or should we blame the evil scientist more than unfortunate one?