

BUSINESS ETHICS :: Utilitarianism

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Introduction

Over the course of the next two lectures we will be looking at two of the most politically and philosophically significant theories of modern times (1500-present), the consequentialist theory of Utilitarianism and the deontological theory devised by Immanuel Kant (often referred to as Kantianism). Today's session will focus on utilitarianism and the next (on Tuesday, 4th October) will look at deontology.

Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory. It is the most well-known and prevalent forms of consequentialism. Consequentialism is an umbrella term for a range of moral theories that state the rightness or wrongness of an action should be based solely on the results produced by that action.

There have been many different forms of theory of a consequentialist nature throughout history. When modern utilitarianism's most influential exponent, Jeremy Bentham, set out his moral theory in 1789, it was not an unfamiliar concept.

Jeremy Bentham

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was born in the 18th Century in London, into a family of prominent attorneys. At that time, England was experiencing a great deal of economic, political and social change. Many of the ideas/practices that had been considered the norm were no longer relevant. Although Bentham studied law, following the family tradition, he never practiced preferring instead to study legal, social and moral institutions and write papers with proposals for reform. He published relatively few of the numerous manuscripts he wrote during his lifetime. His most important theoretical work was *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, which set out most of his moral theory.

Bentham regularly attacked the main political parties in government but it was through his contacts in political life that many of his ideas for reform became a reality (e.g. the Reform Bill of 1832, and the secret ballot). It appears that he had at least an indirect effect on British political life during his lifetime.

When Bentham died in 1832, he left countless pages (tens of thousands) of his writings and a large estate which funded the newly-founded University College, London (for non-conformists, Catholics, Jews and others who could not get into the established universities). He requested that his embalmed corpse be

embalmed and placed in a glass cabinet in the university, and that is where he remains to this day.

Psychological Hedonism and Psychological Egoism

Much of Bentham's moral theory of utility is based on his concept of human nature. Central to this concept was his understanding of human behaviour as solely motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Hedonism is a philosophical theory that views pleasure as the supreme good (or value) and pain as the ultimate evil. Psychological hedonism refers to the notion that human beings are naturally motivated by a desire for pleasure and an aversion to pain.

Early in *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Bentham states that "[n]ature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is from them alone to point out what we *ought* to do, as well as what we shall do" (emphasis added). Using the word 'ought' here indicates that pleasure and pain are not merely motives for action but also define what is morally good and bad (pleasure being good and pain being bad).

Bentham also viewed human beings as essentially self-interested individuals. In fact, he believed that concepts such as 'community' and 'social relations' were useful social conventions but fundamentally meaningless. The individual is the only unit of society and no one individual is more or less important/valuable than another. Psychological egoism is the theory that one always acts in one's own best interests - even if one acts altruistically. When acting altruistically, psychological egoists believe that we are promoting our own happiness whether directly or indirectly.

These two core concepts of human nature had a profound influence on the development of Bentham's theory of utility, as will become clear in the next section.

Theory of Utility

Bentham's theory of utility is based on three central features:

1. The greatest happiness principle (or utility principle)
2. Egoism
3. Artificial identification of one's own interests with those of others

The principle of utility states that what is right is that which promotes the greatest happiness. Utility here is not simply referring to the usefulness of actions but the extent to which an action promotes the good (happiness). Bentham's psychological hedonism accounts for his definition of good/happiness as that which is most pleasurable. Hedonistic utilitarianism interprets a variety of experiences as 'pleasure' and some more contemporary utilitarians are described as pluralists because they identify other intrinsic values besides 'pleasure' such as courage, honesty, friendship and knowledge. The greatest

happiness principle applies to every single action - an action which involves heroic sacrifice but fails to increase the general happiness is morally wrong.

We have already looked at the idea of psychological egoism as stated by Bentham. It was clear that he believed we all ultimately aim to satisfy our own self-interests, altruism (unselfish regard for welfare of others) is impossible - if we act in the best interests of others it is because we will gain some personal satisfaction for doing so. In Bentham's view this is not a bad thing. The idea of psychological egoism may appear to rule out acting in the interests of others most of the time anyway. In actual fact Bentham believed that the value of pleasure was so important that all human beings (egoists) would aim to maximise it even if it was the pleasure of others. The artificial identification of our own interests with others means that human beings will always act in such a way that promotes the general happiness as this benefits all people, if indirectly, in the long term.

Types of Utilitarianism

In recent times utilitarianism has been sub-divided into a number of variant forms. Among these are act, rule, negative and preference utilitarianism.

Act Utilitarianism

Act utilitarianism is one of the simpler and more straight-forward types. Act utilitarianism advises us to judge each individual action on its outcome/results alone. If it is a choice between two courses of action we are morally obliged to take the one which yields the most happiness for the most people.

The problem with this is that it could permit some intuitively wrong acts, such as employing 25 child labourers in China to make cheaper products for a jeans company in England, the profits for the thousands of shareholders in the company would be massively increased.

Rule Utilitarianism

Rule utilitarianism attempts to resolve the moral 'loop hole' (illustrated above) in act utilitarianism. Rule utilitarianism is not concerned with assessing individual acts but the utility of a rule for action. This means that we should judge an act like so: if everyone were to obey this rule, would the general happiness be maximised? In the case of the child labourers we can see that, as a general rule, it would *not* increase the general good if every manufacturer were to employ child labourers in order to increase profits. The same applies in reverse: sometimes more people would experience increased happiness/pleasure if I were to give my money to charity rather than pay my taxes but if everyone were to do this the general good would suffer - there would be no money for roads, schools and social welfare.

This form of utilitarianism has been criticised because it advocates following general rules which often decreases happiness for the people directly involved, thus failing to meet the basic requirement of utilitarianism. Rule utilitarians argue that exceptions can be made to the rules where breaking the

rule would lead to increased happiness. This would appear to render the rules meaningless and revert to simple act utilitarianism.

Negative Utilitarianism

While most forms of utilitarianism tend to be fixed on promoting the greatest good for the greatest number, negative utilitarianism is focused on promoting the least amount of evil (or harm) for the greatest number. Some view this as a more effective ethical theory because there are more ways to do harm than good and the greatest harms have more serious consequences than the greatest goods.

The main objection to this ethical formula is that taken to its logical conclusion, it requires employing all our knowledge to discover the quickest and least painful method of killing the entire human population. This is because every human being experiences pain throughout their life and the only way to be sure of effectively minimising their pain would be to end their life.

Preference Utilitarianism

This type of utilitarianism defines the good to be maximised as the fulfilment of people's preferences. The right action remains that which produces the best consequences but the best consequences are those that satisfy personal preferences and can be a variety of goods/values besides pleasure. This is not pluralist utilitarianism, which recognises several important values.

The main problem with this is that it allows for people to have seemingly unethical preferences, e.g. paedophilia, oppression of women/homosexuals/immigrants. Subjective preferences can only be allowed if they meet a criterion of acceptability - such a restriction may be inconsistent with their idea of preference satisfaction and very difficult to formulate.

Criticisms of Utilitarianism

We have looked at Bentham's theory of utility and how it was developed. The sections describing newer variants of the ethical theory also included the flaws of those particular strains of utilitarianism. Here we will look at the more general objections and difficulties associated with this theory.

ONE: There is a problem with distinguishing types and degrees of happiness/pleasure. Is long-term contentment a lesser, equal or greater type of happiness than short-term euphoria or ecstasy? Bentham's principle of utility requires a method of calculating/measuring happiness, what we would call a 'felicific calculus', but no such method has ever been developed and some would suggest that happiness is immeasurable.

TWO: In utilitarianism, pleasure is neutral - the pleasure of a sadist is equal to the pleasure of the altruist. Although a utilitarian could easily argue that sadist acts often result in greater harm and altruist acts in greater happiness, which would require the utilitarian to condemn sadism and condone altruism.

THREE: The greatest happiness of the greatest number leaves minorities in any society at a distinct disadvantage. Utilitarianism in the strictest form would allow slavery and torture of a few if it increased the happiness of the population as a whole. A utilitarian would argue that a breach of human rights on such a level would lead to tension and mistrust amongst the general population so that slavery would be found to be morally wrong and prohibited. It is necessary to ask if this is a good enough reason for banning slavery?

FOUR: Utilitarianism often requires action that is contrary to our 'common sense' or intuition, especially with regard to sacrificing human beings for the happiness of other human beings. It is argued that human beings have an intrinsic value and should never be used as a means to an end or viewed as expendable.

FIVE: Bentham's utility theory gives significance to pleasure (happiness) as the highest value but only suggests that the reason for this is because human beings naturally desire it. Naturally desiring something does not always mean it should be desired. Would the world be a better place if we were all happy and fulfilled all of the time? How would this affect the human experience?

SIX: The focus on consequences and results, which is central to consequentialist theories, neglects motives and intention. It dismisses their significance for determining the rightness/wrongness of an action. To the utilitarian all that matters is what actually happens - the act is judged alone.

Moral Dilemma

Today's moral dilemma is TRIAGE. In the A&E departments of hospitals all around the world there is a practice of triage - prioritisation of patients in greater need of medical attention over others. As such it means that someone who has a sprained ankle won't get to see the doctor before the person with a gun shot wound in the chest simply because she has been waiting longer. This seems like common sense. However, it is not always as straight-forward as this.

Joseph is a triage nurse in DevelopingWorldLand Hospital. Everyday he has to make tough decisions about medical care for the people who come to the A&E department. The hospital is in a deprived part of town and is way under-funded. There is only one doctor and limited medical supplies. At about 2pm three different serious-case patients arrive together, all requiring immediate attention from a doctor. Joseph must make the decision to send one knowing the others will certainly die even if he is to do what is within his nursing capabilities.

Patient 1 - Sister Catherine is a missionary nun from Ireland who looked after Joseph in the orphanage where he grew up. She has looked after and taught many generations of local children in her 40 years in DevelopingWorldLand and is like a mother to Joseph.

Patient 2 - Jacob is a local man who has been educated abroad and come back to DWL to use his knowledge and skills to help regenerate the national economy

and raise his country out of poverty and debt. He has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics as well as several international humanitarian awards for the grassroots work he is doing in DWL.

Patient 3 - Marion is the single mother of thirteen dependent children. Her husband has recently died of AIDS and if she dies, her children will struggle to feed and clothe themselves. The local orphanage will not be able to take them all due to government restrictions and some will become homeless - their vulnerable position will make them likely targets for local slave-traders.

Divided into groups, the class should discuss the following:

1. what decision you think a utilitarian nurse would make in this situation
2. whether you would find the utilitarian decision to be the most ethical given the circumstances.