

## 11.5 Radical Impartiality: Is Utilitarianism too demanding?

According to utilitarianism, moral actions must be assessed in taking into equal account everyone's interest. Commitment to Radical Impartiality, is the second component of utilitarianism we shall now discuss.

### 11.5.1 Radical Equality and Radical Impartiality

#### From Radical Equality to Radical Impartiality :

Let us start with Mill's statement of Radical Equality or Radical Impartiality:

“[T]he happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.” (Mill, RTD p.76)

This is something we encountered before: the point of view of strict impartiality comes from the idea that we should be equally concerned for everyone.

→ *Within Utilitarianism, because everyone concerned counts equally, no one's interest is more important than other's. In other words, strict equality implies strict impartiality.*

#### The problem :

The idea of radical equality (I should treat everybody in the exact same way) is attractive. Everyone concerned counts, and counts equally.

That said, you may want to consider seriously the following consequence: if your own happiness is going to decrease in order to raise to overall happiness of everyone concerned, then, as a good utilitarian, you should accept it as right. The question arises: is this *too demanding*?

There are at least three ways in which we can criticize utilitarianism for being too demanding.

### 11.5.2 Conflation of moral obligations and moral favors

A common concern among philosophers is that, because of its requirement for strict impartiality, utilitarianism transforms moral favors into moral obligations. In other words, it requires us to be Great Samaritans. There are two aspects of this:

1. **Material side** – cf. Singer on World Hunger

**2. Immaterial side** – By utilitarian standards one is morally obligated to commit to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole.

→ *Utilitarianism requires that you abandon any project or activity which does not obviously increase the amount of happiness in the world as a whole.*

This leads us to the second objection that is often raised against radical impartiality.

### 11.5.3 The problem of personal development

Many of one's activities improve *his or her individual's personal development*, without having any great impact on the welfare of the society as a whole. By utilitarian standards, one is morally obligated to give up on such activities. But these activities may be what make us interesting people leading rich lives.

Examples:

1. the hermit meditating in the mountain
2. (from Rachels) interest in history books
3. And also: reading novels, playing instruments or sports, having dinner with friends, throwing parties etc.

None of these activities significantly increase the welfare of the society as a whole. If the welfare of the society as a whole was our sole concern, our time would be much better spent helping the poor, or working for our community (from neighborhood organization to politics).

→ *Utilitarianism requires that you abandon any personal project or activity which does not obviously increase the amount of happiness in the world as a whole.*

### 11.5.4 The problem of personal relations

Radical Impartiality poses another problem, which is the following. We all have people that we care about more than others. Our family and friends are cases in point. We usually don't treat them as we treat other people we don't know. Because of its commitment to Radical Impartiality, utilitarianism implies that we are morally obligated to treat everybody equally.

Examples:

1. Saving one's child vs. an entire family in a burning building?
2. The single mother in NYC: 5\$ for her single kids, or 5\$ for 5 African kids?
3. Neglect family for politics or humanitarian projects?

→ *Utilitarianism requires that you renounce to give any special treatment to your beloved ones.*

### 11.5.5 Refinement of the view

Strict utilitarians simply bite the bullet on this one. They admit that most of us do not live by the utilitarian standard. That said, that does not mean that the utilitarian standard is misguided, just that most of our lives are. To be a good utilitarian would certainly transform our lives, but for the better, from a moral point of view.

Some refinements of the view have been proposed to deal with the problem caused by radical impartiality:

- **Two main ways out:**

1. Different weights on different persons? **Preference Utilitarianism** seems to be able to accommodate this: people can decide that caring for friends and family members is one of their high ranked preferences
2. Deflating maximization: Proponents of **Progressive Utilitarianism** advocates that we deflate the utilitarian requirement of maximization of utility. That is to say, instead of being morally obligated to maximize utility, we would only be morally obligated to make it increase relatively to its current state. In other words, Progressive Utilitarianism requires that we act so that to make the world a *better* place, not necessarily the *best* we can.

**Definition 29 – Progressive Utilitarianism**

*Progressive Utilitarianism is the view on morality according to which the right thing to do is whatever has for consequence to relatively increase the utility of everyone concerned.*

- **Assessment:**

1. Advantage: Both Preference Utilitarianism and Progressive utilitarianism seem to manage to answer the objection
2. However, some people still reject the idea that caring for friends and family would have to be considered as “morally acceptable” but not “morally right”. Many doubt that utilitarianism can really take the value of friendships and family relationships into account.
3. Strict Utilitarians believe that one important insight is lost with these refinements of the doctrine: the moral point is view is and remains, according to them, the point of view of impartiality.

### 11.5.6 Conclusion on Radical Impartiality

Utilitarianism imposes on us the point of view of radical impartiality. This has important consequences concerning the kind of life that, as good utilitarians, we ought to live.

- A good utilitarian is committed to engage in all these actions that improves the general welfare of the society as a whole, and to engage only in them.

- This is a lot to ask, and many reject utilitarianism for this reason.
- That said, the strict utilitarian would answer that we should not expect that the truly moral life be easy and convenient.

## 11.6 Consequentialism: Is Utilitarianism too permissive?

According to utilitarianism, moral actions must be assessed *solely in terms of their consequences*. Commitment to Consequentialism, is the third and last component of utilitarianism.

The theory's most fundamental idea is that, in order to determine whether an action is right, we should look at *what will happen as a result of doing it*. (Rachels, EMP, p. 103)

The relevant distinction here is between

1. The *motives* of your actions
2. The *consequences* of your actions

→ *Utilitarians consider that the motives do not count when we assess an action as right or wrong. Only the consequences do.*

That said, it seems that such a view will face hard difficulties. Indeed:

- If your motives are good, but the outcome of your action is rather disastrous, then you have done something bad, period. No answer like: "but I had good intentions!"
- Conversely, if your motives are wicked, but the consequences of your actions promote overall welfare, then your actions are good, period. No answer like: "but his motives are awful!"

### 11.6.1 The Advantages of Consequentialism

**The issue of transparency** – Remember that utilitarianism is about giving a straightforward method for moral choices.

It is a fact of the matter that consequences are easier to assess than motives. This for the simple reason that motives are often hidden. It is not even clear that an individual has a clear grasp of his or her own profound motives. The case is even worse for assessing the motives of others.

To look only at the consequences is a way to avoid endless controversies and to make our ethical theory efficient.

**Social and Political Policies** – In the context of social and political policies, the importance of motives is almost of no importance:

- When assessing whether a proposed bill is a good bill or not, what is important is to assess whether or not the society as a whole will benefit from its adoption.

- Example: Whether a dictator has good or bad intentions (maybe he is sincerely willing to help) does not matter: what matters is the overall society's interest.
- And this, whatever the motive that the politician who proposed the bill had in doing so.

So, one can find good motivation for adopting consequentialism. That said, there remain some hard difficulties.

## 11.6.2 The problem of uncertainty and Subjective Utilitarianism

**The problem of uncertainty** –Here are some examples in which assessment by utilitarian standard runs against common sense

1. **Jones and Tom** – Suppose Jones hates Tom, and Jones is going to kill Tom by hitting him with a hammer in the head. Suppose Jones does just that, and thinks Tom is dead. Instead, Tom is found by his girlfriend and taken to the hospital. At the hospital, diagnostics reveal that Tom has brain cancer, which has not yet metastasized. They remove the cancer, and ultimately Tom's life is saved. If Jones had not hit Tom with the hammer, Tom would have died a very unpleasant death from cancer. Now, if he can avoid Jones, Tom will lead a long happy life. Did Jones do something right?
2. **Socrates' trial** – Is Socrates responsible for the ways in which his teaching was used? (Aristophanes: young people using the power of arguments against their parents to prove that a child can beat his parents)

→ *One main problem with consequentialism is that the future is uncertain. Because of this, the actual consequences of our actions may not match the intended ones.*

**Refinement 1: Intended vs. Actual consequences** – Given this, a possible refinement of utilitarianism would be that we assess moral action on the basis of the *foreseeable* consequences and not on the basis of the actual ones. This is the idea of *subjective utilitarianism*.

### **Definition 30 – Subjective Utilitarianism**

*Subjective Utilitarianism is the view on morality according to which what is right to do is whatever the agent can foresee as bringing as a consequence the greatest amount of happiness to everybody concerned.*

→ *There is indeed a minimum of predictability in our lives. The world, the people are minimally predictable. The assessment of our actions should be based on their predictable consequences.*

### 11.6.3 The conflict with Rights and Integrity – Rule Utilitarianism

**No absolute rules** – The problem stems from the fact that, within the utilitarian doctrine, the moral value of an action can be justified only in terms of how it promotes the general welfare.

But there will be contexts in which what will make most people happy involves to break some of what some consider as absolute rights or values. In such contexts, utilitarianism forces us to favor the good consequences over the rights.

→ *There is no absolute moral values for the utilitarian: only the consequences for the general welfare counts.*

**The conflict with justice, rights and Integrity** – Rachels and Williams – The previous criticism is that it is hard to judge our action on the basis of the consequences because of a fact: the uncertainty of the actual consequences. Now, there seems to be a more conceptual reason why consequentialism is unsatisfactory, even if we count only the intended consequences. Here is some examples.

**McCloskey and the riot cases** – cases in which scapegoating a single individual may will bring social peace

**Angela York and the police officers** – nude photos. Improved happiness of the policemen. If she does not know about it, the utilitarian is committed to say that it is right

**The case of the Peeping Tom** – Jim spies on your neighbor through her bedroom window. She does not know about it, and nobody else will. So, his action has only one consequence: it makes him happy to see a naked woman every night (possibly, this will keep his frustration low, so that he will not go and rape someone outside.) Is it the right thing to do?

→ *Consequentialism puts Utilitarianism on a collision course with justice and rights.*

**The problem of personal integrity :**

- William's examples: George the chemist – Jim the visiting dignitary
- Real life example: Nazi medical experimentations on Prisoners

Utilitarianism seem to require people to act against their deep moral commitments so they can't live with moral integrity – a wholeness of character, or a feeling of harmony between their deep values and acts. A strict utilitarian must lack either basic moral values, or moral integrity. Think about: the woman who killed the policeman in order to save the jewish family.

**Refinement 2: Rule vs. Act utilitarianism :**

- One answer to the concerns above is to modify the view:

**Definition 31 – Rule Utilitarianism**

*Rule Utilitarianism is the view on morality according to which what is right to do is to act according to the rule which brings as a consequence the greatest amount of happiness to everybody concerned.*

In this case, the utilitarian standard does not guide us in particular actions but rather in defining the *set of rules which is optimal for the general welfare*.

The idea is then that to secure rights and justice have overall good consequences for the society as a whole. We assess a given rule in looking at its consequence *when applied publicly by everybody*.

Arguably, taking scapegoating, killing an innocent for transplant, or violating someone’s intimacy as rules would have disastrous consequences on the overall society. In particular, this would undermine a necessary sense of trust in the institutions.

- That said, **Rule Utilitarianism runs into other problems:**

What to do with exceptions? – Kill one innocent to avoid a genocide? the harder the rule-utilitarian digs in her heels and defends strict obedience to the rule, the more she moves from the heart of the theory, which is, after all, that consequences are all that matters.

### 11.6.4 Alternative Answer: Stick to your guns and Bite the Bullet

J. C. Smart and others defend a strict version of consequentialism for utilitarianism. His answer to the problems above:

1. **Most of these cases feature bad calculations:**

In the scapegoating case: the consequences would be disastrous if people were to find out about it. Far too risky.

Does it solve the problem? What about a case where we know for sure we won’t get caught?

2. **Common sense is wrong and there are no absolute rules**

We should not rely on our gut-reactions to assess actions. What we call “absolute rules of morality” have no other ground than the overall welfare of the society.

- to think that our friends and family should count more, or that humans count more than animals

- to think that intentions matter when we assess an action – notice that we should distinguish between *assessing the action* and *assessing an agent* – utilitarianism is only concerned with the assessment of actions.

- to think that there are absolute moral rules, rights etc. like “it is always morally wrong to kill an innocent person”

→ *We have come to consider some values as sacred over time, but we should not. Really, value serve the purpose of making the world a better place. If there are circumstances in which they do not fulfill that purpose, so much for the value.*

## 11.7 Conclusion

Rachels p. 115:

“Utilitarianism is a radical doctrine that challenges many commonsense assumptions. In this respect, it does what good philosophy always does – it requires us to rethink matters that we have heretofore taken for granted”

So:

- **What to take from utilitarianism ?**

1. The importance of the consequences of our actions
2. The suspicion that some of our gut-reactions and common-sensical intuitions may not be our best guides

- **Where does utilitarianism succeed?**

1. Management of particular circumstances
2. Social and political policies

- **Where does utilitarianism fails – or at least needs refinement?**

1. The problem of rights
2. The importance of motives