

# Calculating Consequences: The Utilitarian Approach to Ethics

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Imagine that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency gets wind of a plot to set off a dirty bomb in a major American city. Agents capture a suspect who, they believe, has information about where the bomb is planted. Is it permissible for them to torture the suspect into revealing the bomb's whereabouts? Can the dignity of one individual be violated in order to save many others?

## **Greatest Balance of Goods Over Harms**

If you answered yes, you were probably using a form of moral reasoning called "utilitarianism." Stripped down to its essentials, utilitarianism is a moral principle that holds that the morally right course of action in any situation is the one that produces the greatest balance of benefits over harms for everyone affected. So long as a course of action produces maximum benefits for everyone, utilitarianism does not care whether the benefits are produced by lies, manipulation, or coercion.

Many of us use this type of moral reasoning frequently in our daily decisions. When asked to explain why we feel we have a moral duty to perform some action, we often point to the good that will come from the action or the harm it will prevent. Business analysts, legislators, and scientists weigh daily the resulting benefits and harms of policies when deciding, for example, whether to invest resources in a certain public project, whether to approve a new drug, or whether to ban a certain pesticide.

Utilitarianism offers a relatively straightforward method for deciding the morally right course of

action for any particular situation we may find ourselves in. To discover what we ought to do in any situation, we first identify the various courses of action that we could perform. Second, we determine all of the foreseeable benefits and harms that would result from each course of action for everyone affected by the action. And third, we choose the course of action that provides the greatest benefits after the costs have been taken into account.

The principle of utilitarianism can be traced to the writings of Jeremy Bentham, who lived in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Bentham, a legal reformer, sought an objective basis that would provide a publicly acceptable norm for determining what kinds of laws England should enact. He believed that the most promising way of reaching such an agreement was to choose that policy that would bring about the greatest net benefits to society once the harms had been taken into account. His motto, a familiar one now, was "the greatest good for the greatest number."

Over the years, the principle of utilitarianism has been expanded and refined so that today there are many variations of the principle. For example, Bentham defined benefits and harms in terms of pleasure and pain. John Stuart Mill, a great 19th century utilitarian figure, spoke of benefits and harms not in terms of pleasure and pain alone but in terms of the quality or intensity of such pleasure and pain. Today utilitarians often describe benefits and harms in terms of the satisfaction of personal preferences or in purely economic terms of monetary benefits over monetary costs.

Utilitarians also differ in their views about the kind of question we ought to ask ourselves when making an ethical decision. Some utilitarians maintain that in making an ethical decision, we must ask ourselves: "What effect will my doing this act in this situation have on the general balance of good over evil?" If lying would produce the best consequences in a particular situation, we ought to lie. Others, known as rule utilitarians, claim that we must choose that act that conforms to the general rule that would have the best consequences. In other words, we must ask ourselves: "What effect would everyone's doing this kind of action have on the general balance of good over evil?" So, for example, the rule "to always tell the truth" in general promotes the good of everyone and therefore should always be followed, even if in a certain situation lying would produce the best consequences. Despite such differences among utilitarians, however, most hold to the general principle that morality must depend on balancing the beneficial and harmful consequences of our conduct.

### **Problems With Utilitarianism**

While utilitarianism is currently a very popular ethical theory, there are some difficulties in relying on it as a sole method for moral decision-making. First, the utilitarian calculation requires that we assign values to the benefits and harms resulting from our actions and compare them with the benefits and harms that might result from other actions. But it's often difficult, if not impossible, to measure and compare the values of certain benefits and costs. How do we go about assigning

a value to life or to art? And how do we go about comparing the value of money with, for example, the value of life, the value of time, or the value of human dignity? Moreover, can we ever be really certain about all of the consequences of our actions? Our ability to measure and to predict the benefits and harms resulting from a course of action or a moral rule is dubious, to say the least.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with utilitarianism is that it fails to take into account considerations of justice. We can imagine instances where a certain course of action would produce great benefits for society, but they would be clearly unjust. During the apartheid regime in South Africa in the last century, South African whites, for example, sometimes claimed that all South Africans—including blacks—were better off under white rule. These whites claimed that in those African nations that have traded a whites-only government for a black or mixed one, social conditions have rapidly deteriorated. Civil wars, economic decline, famine, and unrest, they predicted, will be the result of allowing the black majority of South Africa to run the government. If such a prediction were true—and the end of apartheid has shown that the prediction was false—then the white government of South Africa would have been morally justified by utilitarianism, in spite of its injustice.

If our moral decisions are to take into account considerations of justice, then apparently utilitarianism cannot be the sole principle guiding our decisions. It can, however, play a role in these decisions. The principle of utilitarianism invites us to consider the immediate and the less immediate consequences of our actions. Given its insistence on summing the benefits and harms of all people, utilitarianism asks us to look beyond self-interest to consider impartially the interests of all persons affected by our actions. As John Stuart Mill once wrote:

The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not...(one'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.

In an era today that some have characterized as "the age of self-interest," utilitarianism is a powerful reminder that morality calls us to look beyond the self to the good of all.

*The views expressed do not necessarily represent the position of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University. We welcome your comments, suggestions, or alternative points of view.*

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