Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is said to be universalist, welfarist, consequentialist, and aggregative. Each of these properties needs some explanation.

Utilitarianism is *universalist* because it takes into account the interests of all those who are affected by an action, regardless of their nationality, gender, race, or other traits that we find, upon reflection, are not morally relevant. The rule "act in such a way as to maximize the expected satisfaction of interests" is one we would be willing to have everyone adopt. Some writers have even claimed, forcefully, this is the *only* such rule.

Utilitarianism is *welfarist* because it defines what is ethically "good" in terms of people's welfare, which we can understand as the satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) of people's interests. Most of us are interested in good health, a good job, and our friends and family, among other things. We could reduce many if not all of these interests to something more general, such as an interest in a happy, pleasurable, relatively painless life. I will use the word "interests" to describe whatever it is that we value here – all those things that matter to us. We can safely say we all have an interest, at a minimum, in a pleasurable life, relatively free of pain. And from experience, we know when our happiness is decreased, as when we suffer acute pain, any other interests we may have tend to recede into the background. That being so, utilitarianism promotes an ethical rule that seeks to satisfy our interests, particularly those in a pleasurable, relatively painless life.

Utilitarianism is *consequentialist* because it evaluates the rightness or wrongness of an action by that action's expected *consequences*: the degree to which an action satisfies interests. These consequences can often be predicted and compared accurately with little more than common sense.

Finally, utilitarianism is said to be *aggregative* because it *adds* up the interests of all those affected by an action. To make a decision, I need to weigh the intensity, duration, and number of interests affected by all of my possible actions. I choose the action that results in the greatest net satisfaction of interests – "the greatest good for the greatest number." Utilitarian decisions

thus involve a kind of accounting ledger, with our like interests serving as a common currency. This is no easy exercise. But, as we'll see, in many of our most important moral judgments, even a rough comparison of interests is enough to make a wise decision.

The Advantages of Utilitarianism

Utlitarianism has several advantages over other ethical theories. First, its consequentialism encourages us to make full use of information about the world as it is. If you have access to the same information as I do, you can argue with me about how I ought to act. This lends utilitarianism a greater degree of empirical objectivity than most ethical theories enjoy.

Some ethical theories hold less regard for consequences than does utilitarianism and address their ethical rules either to actions themselves or to the motivations prompting them. These rules would often lead to misery if they were followed without exception. For instance, we would not have praised Miep Gies, the woman who hid Anne Frank and her family from the

Nazis, had she followed the rule "never tell a lie" and turned the Franks over to the Nazis. Most of us believe the kind of deception Gies engaged in was justified, even heroic. So when should you tell a lie? When the consequences of not telling the lie are worse than the consequences of telling it.

To decide otherwise would be to engage in a kind of rule worship at the expense of other people's interests. Because we are often forced to choose between the lesser of two evils, any rule about particular actions – lying, promising, killing, and so on – can lead to terrible results.

At the same time, it would be foolhardy to live without any general principles. I would not be an efficient utilitarian if, every time I approached a stoplight, I weighed the consequences of respecting traffic laws. This would waste time and regularly lead to poor results. It would be best if I adopted "rules of thumb" that, in general, promote the greatest satisfaction of interests

by guiding my actions in ordinary situations. Such rules of thumb would likely include most of our common views about right and wrong. However, in extraordinary situations, these rules of thumb should be overridden, as in the case of Miep Gies. In this way, utilitarianism supports most of our common moral intuitions while, at the same time, overriding them in important

cases where following them could be catastrophic.

Utilitarianism's aggregative properties offer additional advantages. Our moral decisions regularly benefit one individual at the expense or neglect of another. For instance, in North America and Europe, some citizens are taxed in order to

provide financial support to the disabled, among others. Is it ethical to benefit one group with this tax while another suffers some expense? While such conflicts arise regularly in public policy, they also arise in our personal choices. In deciding to spend $1,000 on a piece of artwork instead of on a donation to a charity, I know a charity now has less money with which to help those in need than it would had I given it my $1,000. Is it ethical to have benefited myself while neglecting others? Utilitarianism, in allowing some exchange of costs and benefits, can help us answer questions like these, whereas many other ethical theories cannot.

Many of the moral stances implied by utilitarianism are familiar and widely accepted. Historically, utilitarians were among the most outpoken opponents of slavery and the strongest proponents of women's suffrage, public education, public health, and other social democratic institutions. In recent years, utilitarians have advanced some of the strongest moral arguments for charity to the poor and sick. At the same time, however, utilitarianism leads us to moral views many of us do not already accept. Prominent among these are moral views regarding nonhuman animals.