Utilitarianism: Understanding And Interpretations

Introduction

Life is full of unanswered questions that affect our daily lives. Some attempt to research these sometimes-mysterious questions in a quest for truth.

Fields of knowledge, like ethics and philosophy, deal with broad questions that involve feelings, morality, and justice. They sometimes use the analytical a priori as a tool, to analyze regarded subjects.

One topic that is still unanswered to this day, is how we ought to live our lives. Do we adapt theories, doctrines or other guidelines to help us figure it out? Or do we simply follow our intrinsic moral compass?

One may consider utilitarianism to answer such questions since it proposes a normative theory, that involves its individual doctrine, that deems to be the best possible way to live one's life, since it procures the highest possibility of happiness for the highest number of people as possible.

In this paper it will be attempted to answer, whether this utilitarian mindset it reliable or not, by determining, if the theory is as well functioning in practice as it is in theory in relation to a few famous dilemmas.

An attempt to connect the good life with the aspect of happiness, (which is the fundamental source in utilitarianism), will be made, to fully establish the true function of utilitarianism and its accountability with the term of happiness.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a branch of normative ethics and is also a form of consequentialism. It is both an ethical and philosophical theory that proposes the use of a doctrine, in which an action is defined as right, as it promotes the highest possible degree of utility or happiness for the mass majority of people involved in a situation where an agent needs good conduct decision making, which makes it a moral theory.

This is hereby used in a guiding principle of conduct, so the utilitarian agent should always keep this guideline in mind while acting.

Classical utilitarianism may also be mentioned as a teleological theory, that determines what accommodates value, whereafter it indicates a proposed obligation to which one must do whatever possible to gain the determined value, which is the basic principle of the theory.

The process of the theory is to analyze and determine what is of value, seek it out and propose a way of achieving it.

The theory constitutes different purposes, that inhabit various aspects, that need to be dealt with in different manners. So, as utilitarianism is both an ethical and philosophical theory, it is important to acknowledge the divergent analysis that accompanies theoretical research.

A strength for utilitarianism is, that it is built on empathy. Empathy is connected to a morally good emotion, which may motivate the promotion of utilized good actions.

The empathic aspect is central in utilitarianism since it deems that happiness should be promoted and suffering eliminated.

Some may argue, that it is false, since the distinction between killing and let die, is irrelevant to utilitarianism if it does not impact the consequences the death bares with it. In situations like these, utilitarianism is not empathic, which is arguably why the utilitarian doctrine is meant to function as more of a guideline.

Ethical & philosophical

As Utilitarianism was first constituted as an ethical theory, it would seem, that since it inhabits these different characteristics, there is a need for different research done on to how to apply the theory in practice. Meaning, that the theory was adapted by Philosophy, as a preliminary attempt to answer the many questionable features it consists, that raise awareness to ethical questions that follow. Both ethics and philosophy intertwine on many accounts, since both fields analyze most of the same matters, only in slightly or sometimes widely different ranges. Indicating, that you cannot have one without the other, if one is searching for solutions or answers to complex quasi dilemmas.

Normally, people inhabit a moral or ethical compass within themselves, that guides their actions. Instead, utilitarians place their inner compass unto the utilitarian doctrine, since they believe, it is the best-represented attempt to reach the maximization of utility possible.

Happiness is such a fundamental element in the spectrum of life, that the theme needs to be researched with different analytical tools, to construe what it truly is and how to apply that research into the field of knowledge. In this case, both in an ethical and philosophical field of knowledge.

Understanding utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a moral theory that is a branch of normative ethics, that focuses on the consequences of actions; Which thereby treats intentions as being somewhat irrelevant, since it is not intentions that decide what happens, only actions do.

If the consequences of an action are good, the action was deemed to be good, which means it created the most possible happiness and therefore is not unjust.

Due to the role of consequences, it is clear, that utilitarianism is just another word to describe consequentialism, whereas the right action is understood entirely in terms of the consequences it results in.

Consequentialism is used to clarify, whether an action can be deemed to be morally good or bad, based on the consequences.

- Good consequences = Good actions
- Bad consequences = Bad actions

To clarify, utilitarianism and consequentialism are the same.

Although, it may not be as simple as that, since making decisions, acting upon instinct or choosing to stay as a passive innocent bystander, are all parts of being human with a well-functioning nervous system; Where choosing to do right or wrong actions, adhere to guilt. Whereas the normative ethical theory, utilitarianism, can produce the “best possible” doctrine, that ought to maximize the happiness in situations where agents need to act, so one does not follow their own set of personal rules. The reason for this, is that, the Utilitarian view ought to maximize the happiness of others, as well as one’s own good.

The function of utilitarianism

As utilitarianism functions as a theory, it presents an attempt of creating equality amongst people, since a utilitarian does not demarcate a person of high class in society and one who might be on a down lowered spiral. It functions as being relatively impartial, so it could, in theory, be applied on all scenarios, regarding all people.

J.J. C Smart mentions, that: “The utilitarian’s ultimate moral principle, let it be remembered, expresses sentiment not of altruism, but of benevolence, the agent counting himself neither more nor less than any other person.”

As well as clearing that up, he includes the hedonistic theory which will be mentioned later.

Diverse interpretations

Utilitarianism can seem the best possible solution to moral issues for some and for others it may seem like a faulty theory, that does not function in extreme scenarios.

Here, Smart approaches what he calls: “Extreme and restricted utilitarianism” , which bares the general terms: act & rule utilitarianism.

These are two different approaches with the same aim: To create the best results, that induces the most possible happiness as possible within a situation.

These situations can differ from being a choice between removing a big rock from a busy road, if you pass by it, so it will not cause harm to others or in an extreme situation, such as in thought experiments where you will need to choose the life of one over another; as in the thought experiment that originated from Philippa Foot and was later further analyzed by Judith Thomson amongst others.

The act and rule utilitarian differ when deciding how to go about their aim.

• Act utilitarianism:

Act utilitarianism states, that right or wrong actions are solely based on the consequences it produces, if it is seen to affect positively on people or not. Smart formulates this in his essay: “Roughly speaking, Act- utilitarianism is the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends only on the total goodness or wrongness of its consequences, i.e. on the effect of the action on the welfare of all human beings (or perhaps all sentient beings)”, where he brings the theory further to not only human beings, but perhaps all sentient beings. Meaning, that actions ought not to only be weighed out by the welfare of the cultivated, yet most of all beings. This can be argued, since the theory is a democratic form of justice, where welfare ought to be available to most people, so it creates the highest possibility of happiness to as many as possible. Bentham, on the other hand believed, that every person's happiness, no matter how mundane or qualitatively inferior, is given equal weight: democracy permits allowing standards to fall to the lowest common denominator.

He also mentions, that he believes, that one should treat each moral situation as unique, meaning, that one should not compare it to other previously handled situations, since there can be so many factors that differ from others, even though they tend to be so alike.

Bentham presented his own method, to establish each individual act to decide whether it would produce the maximum amount of happiness as well as a minimum amount of pain to those affected by the choices that were made. Bentham’s believes, that it is the intrinsic forms that are most valuable and that pain alongside happiness dictate all behavior. Although he cannot prove this to be true, it is unreliable.

In the eyes of a utilitarian, any action can be right, if it follows the necessarily principle of creating the maximum amount of happiness within a given situation.

• Rule Utilitarianism:

A rule utilitarian would tend to draw up the general rules that are based on the utility principle and thereby apply them to any given situation. These rules can proclive to be more absolutist instead of relativist, since they are based almost purely on past experiences and thereby function as a moral doctrine to be applied to all upcoming situations, there is nothing that differs from one situation to another, meaning that they all get treated in the same manner.

The rule utilitarianism appears in two different forms, can be divided into 2 parts :

1. Strong rule utilitarian
2. Weak rule utilitarian

Whereas for the person acting by the strong rule, there is nothing that can differ from the doctrine, since there is a rule that has been established, that, therefore, should be emulated to the last bit. By not following the established rule, one may not gain the ultimate impact of happiness, that is the aim; Otherwise, the rule would not have been made, if not for the sake of happiness.

As for the weak rule utilitarian, there are some circumstances where it is requisite to break or

bend the existing rule to do the morally or ethically right deed, if happiness is better achieved through it.

Rule utilitarianism is most often associated with John Stuart Mill, who agreed on consequentialism, whose claim on the quality of desired happiness will be articulated regarding hedonism.

The proposed doctrine justifies unjust acts, stating, that the theory reaches for unjust aims.

As utilitarian happiness is achieved by violating rights of a minority, it condones unjust acts. Such acts can therefore not be considered within rule utilitarianism, since one shall act in a way, that produces the greatest amount of happiness and this does not. – this creates an issue within the theory, since the aspects do not agree on how to proceed.

Therefore, the normative theory is unjust, meaning that the happiness that is attempted to be reached, is merely out of sight.