Utilitarianism\*

Affiliation

Nikil Mukerji, Technische Universität München, München, Germany

(nikil.mukerji@tum.de)

Keywords

classic utilitarianism, average utilitarianism, preference utilitarianism, consequentialism, teleology, maximisation, hedonism, summation, equal treatment, universalism, the good, the right, impartiality, evaluative criteria, intuitive fit, consistency, completeness, conceptual clarity, simplicity, systematicity

Abstract

This chapter offers a concise discussion of classic utilitarianism which is the prototypical moral doctrine of the utilitarian family. It starts with an analysis of the classic utilitarian criterion of rightness, gives an overview over its virtues and vices and suggests an overall assessment of its adequacy as a theory of morality. Furthermore, it briefly discusses whether classic utilitarianism holds promise as a philosophy for doing business.

Introduction

This chapter addresses two questions: Firstly, is utilitarianism adequate as a theory of morality? Secondly, may utilitarianism be an appropriate philosophy for doing business? Given the scope of the chapter, we will have to restrict ourselves to the prototypical moral doctrine of the utilitarian family: classic utilitarianism. At the end, though, we shall draw a tentative lesson about utilitarianism in general. Throughout, we shall attempt to conduct the discussion in such a way as to avoid a problem rightly lamented by Fred Feldman. He complains that “philosophers have set out to defend (or attack) certain doctrines without first discovering precisely what doctrine they desire to defend (or attack).” [1] We shall thus proceed as follows: In the next section, we shall carefully delineate classic utilitarianism by way of an analysis of its criterion of rightness. This will make explicit the doctrine's fundamental moral claims. After that, we shall proceed to the question whether utilitarianism is adequate as a moral conception. Armed with a list of evaluative criteria for moral theories, we shall look at its virtues and vices. Then, we shall discuss whether classic utilitarianism may be a reasonable ethical guide for doing business. In the last section, we shall sum up and conclude that utilitarianism ought to be rejected as a general moral theory, though it may be a reasonable moral outlook for doing business, provided it is applied within a regulatory framework which countervails its severe moral problems.

Classic Utilitarianism – The Nature of the Beast

The purport of classic utilitarianism is commonly stated either as a thesis about moral rightness or as a thesis about moral obligation. An act is right, according to classic utilitarianism, if and only if it maximises the sum total of happiness or utility of all sentient creatures. It is obligatory if and only if it uniquely maximises total happiness, i.e. if there is no alternative which produces at least the same amount of happiness. This apparently simple doctrine involves a number of distinct moral commitments, to wit, consequentialism, maximisation, hedonism, summation, equal treatment and universalism.

First, let us categorise these components. The cognoscenti of moral philosophy knows that “[t]he two main concepts of ethics are those of the right and the good” and that “[t]he structure of an ethical theory is (..) largely determined by how it defines and connects these two basic notions.” [2] The components of classic utilitarianism can, hence, be classed as belonging either to the concept of right or the concept of good. Consequentialism and maximisation belong to the former [3]. Hedonism, summation, equal treatment and universalism belong to the latter.

As a moral thesis, consequentialism (or “teleology”, as it is sometimes called) is the claim that the rightness of an act depends solely on the moral good that it brings about. Maximisation specifies this dependency. It says that an act is right if and only if it maximises the moral good.

The moral good is the good as seen from an impersonal perspective. What does that mean? When we consider the good from an impersonal perspective we do not ask the nonmoral question “What is good from the perspective of a particular person?”. Rather, we ask the moral question “What is good from a perspective which adequately takes into account and weighs the good of all morally relevant individuals?”. The impersonal perspective is specified, then, by answering the following four questions. Firstly, what is good for the individual? That is, what constitutes her well-being? Secondly, how do we give adequate consideration to the well-being of all morally relevant individuals? Thirdly, what is an adequate method for weighing the well-being of the individuals relative to one another? Fourthly, who is morally relevant? Classic utilitarianism answers these questions in the following way:

Its answer to the first question is hedonism which claims that the well-being of an individual is to be determined by her mental state. A person is better off (worse off) the more (less) utility or happiness she experiences, where the terms “utility” and “happiness” refer to the balance of pleasurable sensations over unpleasant sensations.

The answer to the second question is summation. It says that the well-being of each morally relevant individual is adequately taken into account if it is taken to be a part of a sum of properly weighed individual well-beings.

Equal treatment is the classic utilitarian answer to the third question. It claims that the same weight should be given to the well-being of each morally relevant subject. To use a phrase attributed to the famous utilitarian thinker, Jeremy Bentham, each is “to count for one, nobody for more than one” [4].

Universalism pertains to the fourth and last question. It claims that all individuals whose well-being we may conceivably affect by our actions ought to be given moral consideration. Note that this formulation of universalism draws on the notion of well-being. Since in classic utilitarianism this notion is specified by hedonism, universalism takes the form of “universalistic hedonism” [5] which holds that the sphere of morally relevant subjects is, as Henry Sidgwick has put it, the “innumerable multitude of sentient beings” [6].

Taken together, hedonism, summation, equal treatment and universalism claim that the moral good is the sum total of happiness of all sentient creatures. Maximisation and consequentialism claim, jointly, that an act is right if and only if it maximises the moral good. These theses, taken together, add up to the claim that an act is right if and only if it maximises the sum total of happiness of all sentient creatures.

Evaluation

The evaluation of a moral doctrine requires (albeit implicitly) a set of evaluative criteria. Before we consider the virtues and vices of classic utilitarianism we should, therefore, lay bare the criteria which we shall use in our discussion. Note that at least some of them are rather controversial, as is the field of moral evaluation in general.

Evaluative Criteria

In the following, we shall assume that a moral doctrine ought to fit our moral intuitions about moral principles and moral cases (intuitive fit), avoid contradiction (consistency), class every moral act as either right or wrong (completeness), class at least one act in every choice situation as right (moral dilemmas), use only intelligible notions (conceptual clarity), make economic use of basic notions (simplicity), establish logical connections between its logical components and basic notions as well as its moral principles and case judgements (systematicity).

Virtues

In view of these criteria, how well does classic utilitarianism do as a theory of morality? First, how well does it fit our moral intuitions?

Its first component, consequentialism, appears to be quite an intuitive claim. Some authors even go as far as to maintain that it is the one feature of classic utilitarianism that we are most taken in by. Christine Korsgaard, e.g., explains that utilitarian moral doctrines have such a strong grip on us because many of us believe that “the business of morality is to bring something about” [7]. Other authors have put forward similar views [8].

Maximisation seems to have “a deep intuitive appeal” as well, as John Rawls remarks. He thinks that this is so because it appears to “embody the idea of rationality”. “It is natural”, Rawls says, “to think that rationality is maximizing something and that in morals it must be maximizing the good” [9]. Similar claims can be found elsewhere in the literature [10].

As Roger Crisp notes, hedonism, too, has “long seemed an obviously plausible view” [11]. A simple line of thought developed by John Stuart Mill suggests why this may be so. Assume, firstly, that something is good for us if and only if we desire it. After all, “[t]he only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it (...). In like manner (...) the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.” [12] Now it is undoubtedly true that we desire our own happiness. So happiness is a good for us. Of course, this does not establish hedonism. For we desire a host of things beside happiness – money, music, friendship and what have you. However, it is not wildly implausible to maintain, secondly, that we desire all these things merely because they make us happy. This, then, establishes the hedonist claim that, ultimately, happiness is the only thing which matters in life.

What about summation? This principle is certainly intuitive, since it is “the most familiar operation” [13] to calculate the impersonal good. As in the case of maximisation, there is an analogy with rationality which lends it some credibility. If you want to find out whether act A or act B is the better choice, it seems rational for you to take stock of your gains and losses in each case and balance them off against one another. The better choice option is the one which is more beneficial to you in sum. In a moral choice problem, it seems, you should proceed analogously. To work out whether A or B is the morally better choice, you should look at their respective gains and losses from all the relevant personal perspectives and add them up. The morally better option is then the one with the more beneficial balance of gains over losses.

Finally, what about universalism and equal treatment? It makes sense to look at them in conjunction, since they are closely connected with each other. Universalism requires that, in calculating the moral good, we take all sentient creatures into account whose well-being we may conceivably affect. Equal treatment demands that we weigh their well-being equally. Both claims seem to embody the idea of impartiality. This ties them together and makes them appear very attractive from the moral point of view [14].

Let us move on, then, to the issue of consistency. It is generally believed that it is among the practical virtues of classic utilitarianism that it “will never entail that we ought to do something and we ought to refrain from doing it” [15]. Consider a choice between two mutually exclusive acts, A and B. Classic utilitarianism will either tell you to do A rather than B, if A produces more well-being than B, or B rather than A if the reverse is true. Or it will give you a choice between A and B if both are equally conducive to general happiness. In all possible scenarios, the doctrine's judgements are perfectly consistent. And there is no further possibility. So it seems that classic utilitarianism is, indeed, logically consistent.

Furthermore, it seems that the prescriptions of classic utilitarianism also fulfil the criterion of completeness. The doctrine appears to class all acts as either right or wrong. It may demand that you do A, if A produces more happiness than B. In that case, doing A is right and doing B is wrong. Or it may demand that you do B, if B produces more happiness than A. In that case, doing B is right and doing A is wrong. Or it may give you a choice between A and B, if they produce the exact same amount of utility. In that case, it is right to do either one and no option is wrong.

A further plus of classic utilitarianism is that it is apparently free of moral dilemmas [16]. The doctrine, it seems, will never judge that in a choice between A and B, both options are wrong. Either A is morally better than B, in which case it is right to do A. Or the reverse is true, in which case we ought to do B. Or A is as good as B, in which case we may do both. (It is sometimes said that, if A and B both bring about very bad results, even classic utilitarianism must acknowledge a moral dilemma. After all, if all options produce bad results, there will only be wrong options available to the agent which means that there will be a dilemma. Note that this reasoning confuses a moral dilemma with a “tragic choice”. As much as any serious moral theory, classic utilitarianism acknowledges that in certain situations the agent has to choose between the devil and the deep blue sea. But it holds that even in these cases there is at least one option which, though it may be bad in absolute terms, is best in comparison and, hence, right.)

Classic utilitarianism seems to do well with regard to conceptual clarity and simplicity, too. It is very economical in terms of basic notions. After all, general happiness is the only key concept. That makes it very simple. Arguably, this should also make it conceptually clearer than other doctrines. In focusing only on general happiness, classic utilitarianism avoids elusive notions other moral doctrines rely on, e.g. “desert”, “need” or “justice”.

Finally, classic utilitarianism appears to exhibit a high degree of systematicity. It construes the right as maximising the good and thus establishes a logical connection between the two main concepts of ethics. Furthermore, the components of the classic utilitarian notion of the good are internally connected. Universalism links up with hedonism. Equal treatment and universalism are united through their connection with impartiality. Lastly, all moral verdicts in classic utilitarianism are united by the fact that they follow from one simple standard of right and wrong.

Vices

In what follows we shall look at classic utilitarianism from a more critical angle, reconsidering some of the above points. Let us start, as we did above, with intuitive fit.

Consequentialism, we said, is intuitively plausible, because it captures our intuition that the business of morality is to “bring something about” [17]. Its drawback is that it is very counter-intuitive in other respects. In claiming that rightness depends only on goodness, it neglects other “normative factors” [18] which we intuitively acknowledge [19]. Assume, e.g., that you have a choice between A and B. Both promote the moral good to the same extent. However, while A involves the killing of an innocent person, B does not. It seems that this non-consequentialist consideration should at least break ties in favour of B. Another problem with consequentialism is that it apparently misinterprets the sphere of morality. Most of us believe that this sphere is limited and that not all acts are moral acts. Some acts, we think, are amoral. They are neither right nor wrong. (It is very plausible, e.g., to conceptualise moral questions as questions about “what we owe to each other” [20]). According to consequentialism, though, all acts are moral acts. For in every situation, you have a choice between alternatives, some of which have consequences – for better or worse – on someone's well-being! Instead of going to work today, you could, e.g., go to a retirement home to read to the elderly. Instead of going to play squash tomorrow, you could, e.g., help your neighbour run some errands and so on. There is always an alternative which impacts on the well-being of someone!

Maximisation, we said above, is plausible because it appears rational. A lot of philosophers have attacked this justification, however [21]. They have argued that rationality and morality do not always go hand in hand. This criticism seems to make sense. Practical rationality is standardly interpreted as “instrumental rationality” which “instructs agents to take those means that are necessary in relation to their given ends” [22]. In contrast, in morality the question whether the ends justify the means is a very contested one. Note, however, that this criticism is itself problematic, as it assumes that practical rationality and morality are disconnected. A different strategy to critique maximisation which avoids such a “Dualism of the Practical Reason“ [23] is to offer a unified, non-maximising account of practical reason, as Julian Nida-Rümelin does [24].

A number of points can be added to positively undermine maximisation. To start with, it obliterates moral freedom. If an act is wrong unless it maximises the impersonal good, the number of “moral options” [25] which constitute moral freedom are usually reduced to a single act (the notable exception being the case where two or more options tie for first place). As a consequence, supererogatory acts fall by the wayside. Such acts are morally desirable, but not required, since they involve substantial self-sacrifices which, intuitively speaking, go well beyond the call of duty. If there is no moral freedom, though, no brownie points can be earned by doing an especially good act. The best we can do is always “just good enough”. This implies, e.g., that Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. or Sophie Scholl did nothing especially laudable.

It seems, then, that maximisation is out of touch with common-sense morality when it comes to the issue of self-sacrifice. It fails to recognise that self-sacrificing acts are laudable. But this is only part of the problem. Maximisation may also require self-sacrifices to an unreasonable extent. Suppose you donate a kidney in order to save a person's life. Not only will a maximising moral doctrine like classic utilitarianism fail to see that this is an exceptionally virtuous deed. Worse yet, it will probably require that you give up your second kidney too – and thereby your life! After all, there are always people who need kidneys and some of them will be able to “use” them better than you, since they have higher life expectancies (or a more exciting life). Donating your second kidney would, thus, promote overall well-being and would, accordingly, be required by a maximising moral conception! This is counter-intuitive enough, but there is more! Suppose now you want to give a dear friend a kidney, though you know that this will shorten your life expectancy more than it will extend his. Maximisation may forbid this, since it decreases total well-being! It, thus, conflicts with our conviction that we always have “agent-sacrificing permissions” [26] to immolate our own good for the sake of helping others.

What about the classic utilitarian notion of the impersonal good? Above we reproduced Mill's justification of hedonism. On closer examination, it turns out as bogus. Mill assumes that an analogy can be drawn between the way it is proven that a sound is audible and the way it is proven that an object is desirable. But this is false. The fact that a sound is audible is proven by the fact that people hear it, because this is what it means for a sound to be audible. In contrast, the fact that people desire a thing is not what it means for that thing to be desirable. (Think, e.g., about drug addicts who desire their daily fix.) Desirability is a normative property. As such, its meaning cannot be fixed in terms of observable properties. In fact, the very attempt to do this has become known as the “naturalistic fallacy” [27]. The second part of the argument seems to be flawed too. Mill assumes psychological hedonism which claims that people are solely motivated by their own happiness. But this seems wrong. E.g., parents and spouses buy term life insurances to protect their loved ones financially. Such an insurance only pays if the buyer of the policy has died, at a point in time, that is, when she is unable to feel anything. Plausibly, then, the motivation for buying such a policy cannot lie in the anticipation of increased happiness. The buyer, it seems, pursues a goal which is independent of the goal to be happy. (It may be argued, contrary to this, that the buying of the policy may make the buyer happy now and that this may be seen as her motivation for doing it. But this seems hardly plausible. To be sure, this is not to deny that the buyer will feel good about having bought the policy. It is to deny, rather, that this can be seen as the ultimate motivation that drives the act. It makes much more sense to say that the ultimate goal of the buyer is to protect her loved ones and that her being happy is merely a side effect of having achieved this goal.) Another well recognised criticism of psychological hedonism is that it does not square up with classic utilitarianism as a whole. Assume, contrary to what we have just said, that individuals are, in fact, only motivated by their own happiness. It would then follow that it is psychologically impossible for them to adhere to the demands of classic utilitarianism which requires them, as we have seen, to sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of others. Psychological hedonism in conjunction with classic utilitarianism seems to violate, hence, the deontic principle “ought implies can”.

In the past few decades, many moral philosophers have proposed further arguments to discredit hedonism as a theory of value. A classic objection has been put forward by Robert Nozick [28]. He asks us to imagine that neuroscientists have invented an “experience machine” which can stimulate people's brains. If you plug in, you are guaranteed experiences which give you utmost pleasure – much more than you could expect from real life. According to hedonism, happiness is the only thing that counts. So you should prefer to spend your life hooked up to the machine. Many people find this counter-intuitive, since it matters to them whether the experiences which make them happy are real or fake. (Larry and Andi Wachowski's movie trilogy The Matrix masterfully illustrates the strength of this intuition. It revolves around the protagonists' struggle to break free from a simulated reality.)

Hedonism can be criticised, furthermore, because it is an entirely subjective criterion of well-being. It may be seen as implausible, because “the criteria of well-being that we actually employ in making moral judgments are objective“ [29] or, at least, not entirely subjective. The problem is this: “‘If a starving wreck, ravished by famine, buffeted by disease, is made happy through some mental conditioning (say, via the ‘‘opium’’ of religion), the person will be seen as doing well on this mental-state perspective, but that would be quite scandalous’.” [30]

Finally, hedonism assumes a questionable symmetry between pleasure and pain. It supposes that pleasures and pains of equal magnitude offset each other. Since this is so, the moral goodness of a state of affairs does not change if suffering is added, provided the same amount of happiness is added, too. This holds even in cases in which the amount of pain and suffering is enormous. Karl Popper has pointed out that this seems wrong, since there is “from the ethical point of view, no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure.” [31] Intuitively, the alleviation of suffering seems to be of much greater ethical concern than the promotion of happiness. Hedonism, however, does not acknowledge this.

Like maximisation, summation can be made plausible via an analogy between rationality and morality. This analogy, though, seems again unwarranted. To recap, we said that in a self-interested choice between two options for acting, A and B, it seems rational to look at their respective gains and losses, balance them off against one another and choose the one which is more beneficial in sum. Analogously, in a moral choice between A and B, it seems reasonable to calculate the respective gains and losses of each option from all the relevant personal perspectives and balance them against one another, the morally best option being the one with the most favourable total. Given the aforementioned asymmetry of pleasures and pains, this is untenable. It is plain, though, that there is a further problem. The analogy just does not hold. There is an obvious moral difference between the two cases. In a rational choice, the relevant perspective is that of a single individual. Balancing gains and losses is perfectly fine for that one person, since “each man in realizing his own interests is certainly free to balance his own losses against his own gains” [32]. After all, every loss that is suffered is compensated for by an even larger gain to the same person. In contrast, in a moral choice problem involving more than one person, the balancing of gains and losses is more problematic. One person's loss may be balanced against another person's gain. Thus, summation can be criticised for not taking seriously “the distinction between persons” [33].

A further problem about summation is that it ignores how gains (or losses) are distributed. This has two morally problematic consequences. Firstly, summation is “supremely unconcerned with (..) interpersonal distribution” [34] and, hence, entirely indifferent to concerns of distributive justice. A situation in which my well-being is 10 units and so is yours is morally just as good as a situation in which my well-being is 20 units and yours is 0. Secondly, summation may give rise to a “repugnant conclusion” [35], as Derek Parfit has called it. Since it does not care how goodness is distributed throughout individuals, it does not care whether one person has 10 units of well-being or two persons 5 units or hundred persons 0.1 units. It may conceivably judge that the morally best state of affairs is one in which a hundred billion people “have lives that are barely worth living” [36], since total well-being may be maximal in this state. It should be noted that one way of getting rid of this problem is to depart from total well-being as a measure of the moral good. Instead, we may look at the well-being per capita. This “average utilitarianism”, of course, solves the repugnant conclusion. But it leads to another problem. “[A]verage utility could also be increased by killing the worst off ” [37].

Equal treatment and universalism, we said, appear plausible, since they express impartiality. Two points can be made against this justification. Firstly, the idea that the connection between impartiality and morality is ever so close can be rejected [38]. Secondly, one may acquiesce in the idea that this connection is close, but argue that universalism and equal treatment actually (dis)favour certain individuals instead of treating everyone equally [39]. As for the first line of critique, imagine that a friend of yours is in danger and needs your help. She is in a burning building, say, trapped together with other people. In this situation, should you attach the same weight to her well-being as to everyone else's? It seems that you should not. In fact, it appears you morally ought to be partial to your friend, because the two of you share a special relationship that you do not share with the others. This relationship gives you a “special obligation” to care more for her than for the others [40]. If this is correct, impartiality is not always a moral virtue. Hence, it cannot justify universalism and equal treatment. The second line of critique consists in showing that the equal treatment of everyone's interests may, paradoxically, lead to morally objectionable partialities. “If I have disabilities and you do not, then I might well get less benefit from a stock of material goods than you get from the very same stock. Now suppose you and I have exactly equal stocks of material goods. Because you are in effect a more efficient converter of material goods into personal benefit, utility will be increased here if material goods are transferred from me to you.” [41] This seems to favour you and disfavour me, though. Now, in and of itself, this may not be a problem. For, as we have just seen, there seem to be unobjectionable forms of partiality. But this particular one seems rather dubious. It turns upside down the intuitive principle that “[b]enefiting people matters more the worse off these people are” [42]. I am worse off than you. If anything, then, I should be favoured. Let us conclude, therefore, that the reasoning for equal treatment and universalism seems to be lacking a foundation. In fact, the conjunction of these two claims leads to unacceptable moral implications. It seems, however, that the blame for this is to be put entirely on equal treatment. There is nothing wrong with taking everyone's perspective into account, as universalism commands. The mistake lies in the equal weighing of well-being. This is incompatible with special obligations and a priority of those who are badly off.

In the section above, we observed that classic utilitarianism appears to be free from contradiction. Lars Bergström and Hector-Neri Castaneda, however, point out that there may be a problem regarding its consistency when reasonable deontic principles are added to the picture [44]. Assume that A is the uniquely happiness maximising act for you in some choice situation S. It produces more well-being than any alternative act. It is, hence, right by classic utilitarian standards. Assume further that A is a complex act which consists of A' and A'', each of which can be done independently of one another. They are, then, alternatives to A in S. That is, the agent may do A' or A'' instead of A. Since A is the uniquely happiness maximising act, A' and A'' must be wrong. Now stipulate the following deontic principle, D: If all parts of a complex act are wrong, the complex act itself is wrong. It follows from this principle that A is wrong, since both of its parts, A' and A'', are wrong. According to the classic utilitarian criterion of rightness, however, A is right. There is, hence, a contradiction.

One way to get rid of this problem is to modify the classic utilitarian criterion of rightness so that A comes out as wrong. We can do this by augmenting its criterion of rightness with D so that it says that following: An act is right if and only if it maximises general happiness and not all its parts are wrong. This removes the inconsistency. Instead, we get a moral dilemma, because under this criterion every act comes out as wrong. This shows, contrary to the prevailing view, that it is possible for classic utilitarianism to produce a formal dilemma – at least if it is combined with seemingly weak assumptions about deontic logic.

Note that a number of authors have proposed different solutions to the consistency problem which do not lead to a dilemma [45]. Some, however, may lead to incompleteness, as e.g. Erik Carlson's proposal. It is easy to reproduce the result. To avoid the dilemma, we stipulate that alternative acts must be mutually exclusive. Since A' and A'' are included in A, they cannot be alternatives to A. Rather, A'&non-A'' and non-A'&A'' are alternatives to A, since they are incompatible with A. This removes the moral dilemma, since A'&non-A'' and non-A'&A'' are not parts of A. As a result of restricting the notion of an alternative, A comes out as right and this does not produce a contradiction. But now some acts, to wit, A' and A'', lack moral status.

What about simplicity? Above we said that classic utilitarianism involves only one key concept – general happiness – and is therefore very simple. Many moral philosophers, however, have refused to count this as an advantage. Bernard Williams, e.g., urges that “the desirability of a system of social choice can be considered only relative to what it can reasonably be asked to do” [47]. Classic utilitarianism ignores, as we have seen, moral constraints, special obligations, moral freedom, distributive justice and so on. If we believe, as most ethicists do, that a moral doctrine can reasonably be required to accommodate these things, we may come to share Williams's view that “the simplicity of utilitarianism in this respect is no virtue” [48].

We also said that classic utilitarianism appears to involve a higher degree of conceptual clarity than other moral doctrines, since it draws only on one key notion – general happiness – and thus avoids notoriously unclear concepts like 'justice', 'need' and so on. But this, by itself, does not make it clear. For, as it turns out, the notion of general happiness on which the doctrine exclusively relies is itself quite unclear. Firstly, it is hard to explain how quantities of happiness can be measured and intrapersonally compared. Secondly, it is hard to make sense of the notion of a utility sum, since this requires interpersonal comparisons. With regard to the first problem, Jeremy Bentham suggested that the amount of pleasure (or pain) that an individual experiences should be seen as the product of intensity and duration. (Bentham's proposal is actually more complex. In addition to intensity and duration, he mentions the certainty or uncertainty of a pleasurable sensation, as well as its propinquity or remoteness, its fecundity and its purity [49]. For our proposes, however, intensity and duration suffice to make the point.) Does this explanation help? Duration is undoubtedly a clear notion. But intensity is not [50]. How would you, e.g., rate the intensity of the pleasure that you get from tasting your favourite sort of ice-cream relative to the intensity of the pleasure that you get from listening to your favourite piece of music? It is hard to express this in numerical values, because the respective experiences are very different. A related problem is hinted at by Henry Sidgwick [51]. Since our sensations are so heterogeneous, it is hard even to figure out which sensations count as instances of pleasure and which sensations count as instances of pain. E.g., why do we consider both eating ice crème and listening to music as pleasurable? What do they have in common? The notion of individual happiness, then, is in dire need of explanation. But even if this complication could effectively be addressed, a second problem would remain. How do we make sense of an interpersonal utility sum? As Jeremy Bentham himself conceded, in summing utilities we are adding up totally distinct entities. There is no such thing as our collective utility. There is only my utility and yours. Instead of adding them, we might as well “pretend to add 20 apples to 20 pears” [52].

Systematicity is the last item on the list. Above we said that classic utilitarianism appears to be a very systematic doctrine and there is indeed not much to add to this. A minor point is that it appears unsystematic in at least one way. It demands to give moral consideration to all sentient beings. At the same time though, it cannot be morally binding upon all sentient beings, since some of them act only on impulse and do not have the cognitive resources to apply the doctrine. Kantianism, e.g., possesses the highest degree of theoretical unity in this respect. The rationality of a being is the source of its moral obligations. At the same time, it is the reason why it is owed moral consideration.

Classic Utilitarianism and Business Ethics

Let us now turn to the second question. May classic utilitarianism be an appropriate philosophy for doing business? As we have seen above, it seems to be defective as a general theory of morality, since it focuses all too narrowly on general happiness and disregards, thereby, important moral concerns. Is it then possible that classic utilitarianism may be a reasonable moral code for business? Somewhat surprisingly, it might be, provided an adequate legal framework exists which restricts its morally problematic tendencies. The justification of classic utilitarianism as a philosophy of business is analogous to the justification of self-interested behaviour. The idea is as follows: We write up a system of moral standards which is properly administered and sanctioned, so that everyone will follow it. This legal framework will ensure that moral boundaries are not transgressed. That is, it will remove certain options for actions which are morally intolerable. If economic agents choose amongst their remaining options in a way that promotes general well-being, this will no longer be morally objectionable.

Here is an example of how this might work. Consider Sally. She is a manager who is committed to promoting general well-being. In an of itself, this is not a bad thing, so long as Sally does not transgress any moral boundaries. One day, however, she ponders whether it would promote general well-being if she had her workers beaten. She reasons that this would make them more productive, thus promoting total well-being. In order to prevent her from doing this, we have to set up the legal rules in such a way that the beating of the workers would not increase aggregate well-being. We can do this, e.g., by imposing a penalty on a business practice like this which eats up any increase in utility. Taking this penalty into account, Sally would conclude that she ought not to have her workers beaten.

The suggestion to use classic utilitarianism as a philosophy of business has, however, an obvious Achilles heel. It may involve an implementation problem. As we have seen above, the fact that the doctrine transgresses moral constraints is not the only problem it has. Another problem is that it may, at times, demand enormous moral sacrifices. This, it may be claimed, is not only morally questionable. It is also incompatible with the imperative of a business environment which is to make profits [56]. After all, if a business does not make sufficient profits, it may be forced to leave the market. The worry is, then, that a classic utilitarian business ethic is impossible to implement in a market environment, since its demands may clash with the need of businesses to make profits. Whether this criticism applies depends on what the doctrine will actually demand. The answer to this question is a priori unclear and should be investigated by further research in applied ethics. It depends, roughly, on whether the “shareholder theory” or the “stakeholder theory” is correct. “[U]tilitarians favouring the shareholder theory argue that maximizing shareholder interests (…) will (…) tend to maximize overall utility. (…) Advocates of the stakeholder theory argue that all stakeholders (shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, society, etc.) should be taken into consideration directly in the utilitarian calculation.” [57] If the shareholder theory is correct, the demands of a classic utilitarian business ethic may be sufficiently aligned with the imperative of a market economy. If, on the other hand, the stakeholder theory is correct, classic utilitarianism may regularly demand that businesses sacrifice their profits in order to benefit stakeholders. In that case, a classic utilitarian business ethic would, indeed, face a severe implementation problem in a market economy. Putting this question aside, let us conclude, merely, that classic utilitarianism may be a candidate for a reasonable philosophy of business if it is applied against the background of an adequate legal system. However, we must not conclude that this exculpates classic utilitarianism from the problems we have identified above. The reason why it seems to be unobjectionable as a morality for business is that, by assumption, “elsewhere in the social system the necessary corrections (…) are being made” [58] on the basis of non-utilitarian moral considerations.

Conclusion

Let us cap and conclude then. We started our discussion of classic utilitarianism with an analysis of its criterion of rightness which says that an act is right if and only if it maximises the sum total of happiness of all sentient creatures. Logically speaking, this claim is the result of combining consequentialism, maximisation, hedonism, summation, equal treatment and universalism. In the next step, we analysed the classic utilitarian doctrine in view of its correspondence with our intuitive moral judgements, its consistency, its completeness and its potential moral dilemmas as well as its conceptual clarity, simplicity and systematicity. Prima vista, we found that classic utilitarianism had something to be said in its favour on all counts. At second glance though, we had to revise this judgement. Many of the arguments supporting classic utilitarianism are unsound or, at least, questionable. In addition, there are many considerations which positively undermine the doctrine. This holds particularly with regard to its intuitive fit. Overall, then, I suggest that classic utilitarianism should be rejected as a general theory of morality. All of its components, except universalism, yield implications which are (sometimes wildly) at odds with our moral sense. However, classic utilitarianism may be a reasonable philosophy for doing business, provided it is applied within a framework of rules which incorporates non-utilitarian moral concerns and thereby countervails its severe moral problems.

Above I said that our discussion of classic utilitarianism will enable us to make a tentative pronouncement about the family of utilitarian doctrines in general. So how do we generalise our conclusion? To see this, let us look at some non-classic versions of utilitarianism. Take, e.g., preference utilitarianism. It rejects hedonism in favour of a preference-based view of well-being, but keeps the other components of the classic doctrine on board. It may, then, conceivably avoid the flaws of hedonism. But it will inherit all the other problems associated with classic utilitarianism. The same holds for average utilitarianism. It rejects plain summation and avoids, thus, some of its problems (e.g. the “repugnant conclusion”). But it inherits all the other flaws of classic utilitarianism. The same holds for other versions of utilitarianism that modify certain aspects. Therefore, I suggest, cautiously, that we ought to reject as theories of morality all forms of utilitarianism which are sufficiently similar to the prototypical case, since most problems carry over.

Admittedly, this conclusion does not come as a surprise. For quite some time, it has been a common place in moral philosophy to pronounce utilitarianism dead. In this connection, a famous conjecture by Bernard Williams comes to mind. He claimed that “the day cannot be too far off in which we hear no more of it” [59]. Curiously, though, it seems that the demise of utilitarianism has been greatly exaggerated. It is still “alive and kicking” [60], as some believe. At any rate, it is remarkably resilient in the face of severe moral complications. And it “tends to haunt even those of us who will not believe in it“ [61]. Why is this so? How does utilitarianism survive, given that it is so objectionable a doctrine? I suspect that its resilience can be explained by our psychological disposition to mistake a strong “pro tanto reason” for a “sweeping reason” [62]. If an act promotes general well-being, this is certainly a consideration which, to a considerable extent, counts in favour of it. It is certainly a pro tanto reason. From a logical point of view, this observation is, of course, worlds apart from the utilitarian claim that considerations of general well-being are sweeping reasons. Psychologically, however, the two propositions appear to be quite close, so that a move from the one to the other seems to be only a small step which appears “so short and looks so innocent” [63]. In order not to fall into the trapdoor of utilitarianism we should, therefore, remind ourselves, as Amartya Sen urges, that “[i]t is one thing to see utility as important, which it must be, but (...) quite another to insist that nothing else matters” [64].

Cross-References

References

[1] Fred Feldman, Utilitarianism, hedonism, and desert: essays in moral philosophy (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 13, emphasis in the original.

[2] John Rawls, A theory of justice. (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 21.

[3] Cf. e.g. Jörg Schroth, “Distributive Justice and Welfarism in Utilitarianism”, Inquiry, 2008, 51(2), 123–146.

[4] John S. Mill, Jeremy Bentham, John Austin and Mary Warnock, Utilitarianism: and, On liberty. Including Mill's Essay on Bentham' and selections from the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin (Wiley-Blackwell Publications, 2003), 233.

[5] Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1907/1981), 411.

[6] Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1907/1981), 404.

[7] Christine M. Korsgaard, “The reasons we can share: An attack on the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral values”, Social Philosophy and Policy, 1993, 10(1), 24–51, emphasis in the original.

[8] Cf. e.g. Philippa Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”, Mind, 1985, 94(374), 196–209; Samuel Scheffler, “Agent-Centred Restrictions, Rationality and the Virtues”, Mind, 1985, 94(375), 409–419.

[9] John Rawls, A theory of justice. (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 22.

[10] Cf. e.g. Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”; Samuel Scheffler, Rejection of consequentialism: Philosophical investigation of the considerations underlying rival moral conceptions (Oxford: OUP, 1982/1994), 2-3.

[11] Roger Crisp, “Well-Being”, in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2008 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being.

[12] John S. Mill, Utilitarianism (Parker, Son and Bourn, 1863), 51-52.

[13] Leonard W. Sumner, The moral foundation of rights (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 171.

[14] Troy Jollimore, “Impartiality”, in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2011 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/impartiality.

[15] Krister Bykvist, Utilitarianism: A Guide for the Perplexed. (London: Continuum, 2009), 23.

[16] Cf. e.g. Mill, Utilitarianism, 37; Michael A. Slote, “Utilitarianism, Moral Dilemmas, and Moral Cost”, American Philosophical Quarterly, 1985, 22(2), 161–168; Alastair Norcross, “Should Utilitarianism Accommodate Moral Dilemmas?”, Philosophical Studies, 1995, 79, 59–83.

[17] Christine M. Korsgaard, “The reasons we can share: An attack on the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral values”, Social Philosophy and Policy, 1993, 10(1), 24–51.

[18] Shelly Kagan, Normative Ethics (Colorado: Westview, 1998), 17.

[19] Cf. e.g. Philippa Foot, Virtues and vices and other essays in moral philosophy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 19-32; Judith J. Thomson, “The Trolley Problem”, The Yale Law Journal, 1985, 94(6), 1395–1415.

[20] Thomas M. Scanlon, What We Owe to Each Other (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

[21] Cf. e.g. James Griffin, Well-being: its meaning, measurement and moral importance (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 154; Peter Vallentyne, “Against Maximizing Act-Consequentialism”, in: Jamie L. Dreier (ed.), Contemporary debates in moral theory (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 21–37.

[22] R. Jay Wallace, “Practical Reason”, in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2009 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/practical-reason.

[23] Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1907/1981), xii.

[24] Cf. e.g. Julian Nida-Rümelin, Strukturelle Rationalität (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001).

[25] Shelly Kagan, “Defending Options”, Ethics, 1994, 104(2), 333–351.

[26] Michael A. Slote, “Morality and the Self-Other Asymmetry”, The Journal of Philosophy, 1984, 81(4), 179–192.

[27] George E. Moore, Principia Ethica. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988).

[28] Cf. e.g. Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 42-45.

[29] Thomas M. Scanlon, “Preference and Urgency”, The Journal of Philosophy, 1975, 72(19), 655–669.

[30] Amartya K. Sen, “Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984”, The Journal of Philosophy, 1985, 82(4) 169–221.

[31] Karl R. Popper, The open society and its enemies: the spell of Plato. (New York: Routledge, 1945/2008), 317.

[32] John Rawls, A theory of justice. (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 21, emphasis added.

[33] John Rawls, A theory of justice. (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 24.

[34] Amartya K. Sen, James E. Foster,. On economic inequality. (Oxford: OUP, 1973), 16.

[35] Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford: OUP, 1986), 387.

[36] Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford: OUP, 1986), 388.

[37] Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Consequentialism”, in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism.

[38] Cf. e.g. Bernard A. O. Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality”, in: Bernard A. O. Williams, Moral luck: philosophical papers, 1973-1980. (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), 1–19.

[39] Cf. e.g. Amartya K. Sen, “Equality of What?”, in: Amartya K. Sen, Choice, welfare and measurement (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1997), 353–370.

[40] Diane Jeske, “Special Obligations”, in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/special-obligations.

[41] Brad Hooker, Ideal Code, Real World (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 64.

[42] Derek Parfit, “Equality and Priority”, in: Derek Matravers (ed.) and Jonathan E. Pike (ed.), Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy - An Anthology (London: Routledge), 115–132.

[43] Cf. Peter Vallentyne, “Teleology, consequentialism, and the past”, The Journal of Value Inquiry, 1988, 22, 89–101.

[44] Lars Bergström, The alternatives and consequences of actions: An essay on certain fundamental notions in teleological ethics (Almqvist & Wiksell, 1966); Hector-Neri Castaneda, “A Problem for Utilitarianism”, Analysis 1968, 28(4), 141–142.

[45] Cf. e.g. Krister Bykvist, “Alternative Actions and the Spirit of Consequentialism”, Philosophical Studies 2002, 107(1), 45–68; Eric Carlson, “Consequentialism, Alternatives, and Actualism”, Philosophical Studies, 1999, 96, 253–268; Fred Feldman, Doing the Best We Can – An Essay in Informal Deontic Logic (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing: 1986).

[46] Holly S. Goldman, “Doing the Best One Can”, in: A. I. Goldman (ed.), Jaegwon Kim (ed.), Values and morals: essays in honor of William Frankena, Charles Stevenson, and Richard Brandt (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1978), 185–214.

[47] John J. C. Smart, Bernard A. O. Williams, Utilitarianism: For and Against (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), 137.

[48] John J. C. Smart, Bernard A. O. Williams, Utilitarianism: For and Against (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), 137.

[49] Jeremy Bentham, The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham. Published under the Superintendence of his Exectutor John Bowring – 1 (Edinburgh: Williams Tait, 1838), 16.

[50] Cf. e.g. Amartya K. Sen, “Plural Utility”, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1980-1981, 81, 193–215.

[51] Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1907/1981), 127.

[52] John R. Dinwiddy, William L. Twining, Bentham: selected writings of John Dinwiddy (Stanford, CA: SUP, 2004), 49.

[53] Amartya K. Sen, “Equality of What?”, in: Amartya K. Sen, Choice, welfare and measurement (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1997), 353–370.

[54] John Rawls, A theory of justice. (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 281.

[55] Cf. e.g. Karl Homann, Christoph Lütge, Einführung in die Wirtschaftsethik (Münster: LIT, 2004).

[56] Cf. Karl Homann, Christoph Lütge, Einführung in die Wirtschaftsethik (Münster: LIT, 2004), 25.

[57] Milton Snoeyenbos, James Humber, “Utilitarianism and Business Ethics”, in: Robert Frederick (ed.), A companion to business ethics (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 17–29.

[58] John Rawls, Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993/1996), 269.

[59] John J. C. Smart, Bernard A. O. Williams, Utilitarianism: For and Against (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), 150.

[60] Krister Bykvist, Utilitarianism: A Guide for the Perplexed. (London: Continuum, 2009), 2.

[61] Philippa Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”, Mind, 1985, 94(374), 196–209.

[62] Shelly Kagan, The Limits of Morality (Oxford: OUP, 1989), 17.

[63] James Griffin, Well-being: its meaning, measurement and moral importance (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 154.

[64] Amartya K. Sen, The Idea of Justice (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 282.