UTILITARIANISM IS INHUMAN

Luke Pollard

In this article Luke Pollard examines and expounds the integrity objections to Utilitarianism. He argues for their veracity, and concludes that any ethical theory, such as Utilitarianism, which makes itself impossible for humans to follow, is not what may be considered as a 'valid moral framework'.

Introduction

John Stuart Mill outlined his utilitarian ethic as follows; that,

> ... actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. [*Utilitarianism* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000), p. 14]

The basic utilitarian principle tells us to cause the greatest overall happiness. It doesn't matter whose, and it doesn't matter when, only that our actions produce this end.

Whilst many see this framework as one of the most intellectually acceptable moral theories of modern times, others have spotted various possible spanners in its machinery. Philosophical objections have ranged from questions such as – 'How do we know for *sure* what our actions will produce?' to 'How can one *measure* happiness?' However, there is an objection which is lesser known in the popular circles, but is better qualified, which will be presented in a clear format here. In my view, the clearest and most convincing range of criticisms are encompassed by the title; 'Integrity Objections'.

The modern ethical Philosopher Bernard Williams (Bernard Williams's essay, *Utilitarianism For and Against* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973) pp. 77-150) argues that Utilitarianism requires us to break our own ethical intuitions

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and moral convictions – that following it enslaves us as utility operators, devoid of any genuine human feelings.

I agree with Williams that an ethical theory which causes us to lose our humanity in this way clearly breaks our *integrity* as men and women. Anything that breaks our integrity as human beings is too demanding. Thus it can be said that Utilitarianism is 'too hard to follow'. A moral framework that is not applicable in this way, it will be argued, fails in its primary objective. And a moral framework that cannot be followed is not a *valid* moral framework at all.

The integrity objections

The integrity objections fall into two main categories. The first of these points claims that utilitarianism does not account for the importance of human friendships, projects and moral feelings. The second takes this further, arguing that the utilitarian ethic leads us to intolerably great lengths of moral anxiety, blaming us not only for the pain we actively cause, but also for that which we allow to be caused through inactivity. And this demands too much of us.

I shall now examine these problems in order.

The importance of individuals

By its very nature, utilitarianism aims to increase the aggregate happiness. The importance of each human does not feature in utilitarianism. So violating some individual's lifetime aspirations or moral feelings is a perfectly acceptable way of creating the greatest over-all happiness. The objection is best explored with an example.

Bernard Williams uses the illustration of 'George the scientist' to make his point. George is a young and highly qualified chemist who is in great need of a job, in order to support his family. An older friend of his suggests that he takes a job in a laboratory working on chemical warfare. George replies that he cannot do this because he does, and always has, strongly disagreed with the use of these kinds of weapons. But his friend explains that if George doesn't take the post, a contemporary of his, who is far more zealous, will take it. The

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laboratory will be doing its work anyway. And if George accepts the job, at least it won't go to the over-zealous chemist who is likely to create far more deadly devices.

It seems clear what George must do according to utilitarianism. To produce the greatest over-all happiness by sustaining his family and stopping his over-zealous contemporary, he must abandon all the moral sentiments he holds dear and take the job.

Here, utilitarianism doesn't allow George to uphold his integrity. It just requires him to act in a certain way. George is simply a person in the wrong place at the wrong time. Utilitarianism would require any person in the same situation to take the job. It doesn't matter that this causes George to go against everything he believes in. It is not about the person, or about their moral feelings and emotional commitments. The individual is treated merely as an instrument in the cause of utilitarianism. 'The utilitarian self is too thin.' [Roger Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism* (Oxon: Routledge, 1997), p. 142] Surely this is objectionable.

Too demanding

The second integrity objection concerns the notion of *negative responsibility*. This is prevalent in utilitarianism, where it is the consequences of our actions that make the action good or bad. Suppose I have a choice to either perform action A or not to perform A. I know that if I do A, consequence 1 will occur. So, I will be responsible for the situation 1. I also know that if I choose *not* to perform action A, consequence 2 will occur. And under utilitarianism, my inactivity will make me responsible for situation 2. This is what is termed *negative responsibility*.

Now, the result of accepting utilitarianism and thus – necessarily – the doctrine of negative responsibility, is that it makes us overly responsible. Allow me to give you an example first used by Bernard Williams, which has since become famous.

Jim is a botanist working in South America. One day he stumbles into a small village. He sees that tied up against

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a wall, are 20 villagers. A group of soldiers are preparing to shoot them, when their captain, Pedro, spots Jim. Seeing that he is a foreigner, Pedro honours him by giving him a choice; Either Jim himself shoots one of the 20 and thus the other 19 go free, or Jim does nothing and all the 20 innocent villagers are killed. Jim has no way out of this situation and so must choose one of the options. He detests the idea of killing, what is he to do?

In order to create the greatest happiness, Jim's duty is to forget his long-held ethical convictions, to pick up the gun, and to shoot one of the 20.

This may or may not be the right conclusion. I leave that up to you to decide. It is not the conclusion that concerns us here, but the way that utilitarianism reaches its result.

If Jim shoots the one, he is responsible for one death. If he refuses, he is responsible for 20 deaths. Even though the soldiers shoot the 20, the utilitarian doctrine of negative responsibility makes Jim guilty as well. He has done nothing, but still he is responsible for 20 deaths.

Surely this is unfair? One may respond, along the lines of R.M.Hare [*Moral Thinking; It's Levels, Method, and Point* (Oxford University Press, 1981) chp. 6] that this sort of situation occurs so rarely, if at all, that it should be discounted. For, as he argues, our moral intuitions cannot reliably deal with this kind of rarity.

However, I would argue that Hare is not thinking widely or deeply enough, for one may see this sort of situation happening in every-day life. Suppose I choose to go out for dinner tonight and spend £20. A Utilitarian would have to argue that in order to maximize general happiness, I should have stayed in and donated the money to aids orphans. The £20 might save two people's lives. Thus, in going out for dinner, I am 'negatively responsible' for the deaths of two children in the 3rd World.

Let's take this core utilitarian principle further. I have money in a bank account. By keeping it there, I am not donating it to charity, and thus am not only letting people die, I am *responsible* for their deaths.

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How far is this utilitarian principle really liveable? How much normal human behaviour will it allow us to take part in without us being seen as responsible for starvation, disease and death?

Can one really follow an ethical system that holds you responsible for a child's death because you ordered scampi at a restaurant?

Conclusion

The integrity objections, then, in my view argue convincingly that not only does utilitarianism take no account of the individual, but it also makes itself impossible for the individual to follow. This leads us to ask one final question – If a moral theory makes itself too hard to follow, can it be considered as a *valid* moral theory? Surely an ethical framework must be adherable by human beings? If it is too hard for humans to follow, then it cannot be an ethical theory *for* humans. It seems reasonable to claim that an ethical theory which is in effect, inhuman, cannot be considered as a valid moral framework. For, it fails in its primary objective – to guide human action.

As we have seen, utilitarianism make itself too hard to follow. Therefore, one may conclude that it is both inhuman, and invalid.

Luke Pollard is a writer particularly interested in Ethics and Philosophy of Religion.

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