

Does rule-  
utilitarianism solve  
the problems faced  
by act-utilitarianism



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Utilitarianism is a broad discipline, encompassing moral philosophers with fundamentally contrasting bases to their ethics. One of these conflicts is between the absolutist act based philosophers, of whom I believe Mill is one, and the less stringent rule-utilitarians. The crux of the conflict between the schools lies in the leeway given to an individual when making behavioural choices; act-utilitarians would have us rely entirely on an ordinal system of hedonism, and rule-utilitarians would replace this calculation with a set of moral guides based on the tendency of an action to promote welfare.

The uncompromising position of act-utilitarians has the advantage of remaining true to the attractive, simple core of utilitarianism - that welfare is desirable and maximising welfare our ultimate goal. However, in advocating an inflexible ethic, particularly to a society with a well established moral code, the act-utilitarians create a number of problems for themselves. These problems are in many cases circumvented by rule-utilitarianism, though it is important to bear in mind that this is not necessarily a qualification of the latter.

There are three major issues with act-utilitarianism, as expounded by Mill. The first rests in the need for a morality to be practicable - the very lifeblood of moral philosophy is the aim of refining and advancing society's ideals and the method of implementing them. Brad Hooker's criticism of act utilitarianism as unattainable for humans, who, by their very nature, must concern themselves primarily with self, seems an important one.

If the claim that the endless calculations and sacrifice of act-utilitarianism engenders misery and thus undermines total welfare, then there is the

possibility that act-utilitarianism self defeats. Rule-utilitarianism steps into this breach by removing the uninviting prospect of calculating the outcome of our every decision in terms of pleasure and pain. The allowance for the unexpected in the pivotal caveat that actions with a tendency to promote welfare are acceptable also eases some of the burden of act-utilitarianism.

Should we take the view, as Mill does, that act-utilitarianism is rescued by the nature of human conditioning, which may lead to the acceptance of virtually anything, however daunting the initial task may seem (and, indeed, that we should not shy from daunting tasks for that sake alone), there is a further problem with the theory. It is that, as humans, we cannot abandon the niggling thought that there are actions that are right and wrong - that some things are intrinsically abhorrent, and that act-utilitarianism would call for acts to be committed that cannot be justified.

This is not satisfied by Mill's faith in conditioning, because it seems that the distributive problem of utilitarianism goes deeper than our moral code.

Humans feel pain keenly, and our self-knowledge dictates that given the choice, we would avoid the concentration and intensity of pain that act-utilitarianism accommodates. Rule-utilitarianism, according to the particular rules chosen to follow, circumvents this possibility in advocating actions that on the whole promote welfare and, on the whole, intense pain does not.

Thirdly and finally, rule-utilitarianism would facilitate the close personal attachments that humans are so reluctant to abandon. In recognising that the structure of the family, for example, generally gives society coherence and structure, and promotes welfare, the rules system could encompass

much of what is essential to humanity - that which act-utilitarianism removes. It is clear, therefore, that by watering down utilitarianism to general principles makes it both feasible and even increases the chances of the Greatest Happiness Principle being realised.

What is not clear is where the line should be drawn and whether or not rule-utilitarianism is simply a continuation of our current ethic. That is a little beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is helpful to bear in mind that the system of rules is not substantiated by its ability to plug holes in the absolutist approach. Let us deal in a little more detail with the argument based on the view that utilitarianism is excessively prescriptive and thus too draining to implement.

The criticism is two-fold; primarily act-utilitarianism is so alien to our needs as humans that its success is inconceivable. Should Mill's concept of the theory being taught as a " religion" be realised, the nature of act-utilitarianism - the lack of self-determination and time consuming calculations, the compromising situations that would demand immoral actions according to our instinctive ethics - would simply engender widespread misery. It is a distinct possibility that even if we accept Mill's proof as valid, then the practical considerations of the theory would be its downfall.

By definition, rule-utilitarianism sidesteps this problem. Rule-utilitarians by definition must account for the willingness of people to obey a rule before formulating it. This would almost certainly reduce the level of obligation that any one person had to others. For example, under act-utilitarianism

everyone might be expected to commit their leisure time to voluntary work. Under rule-utilitarianism it may be decided that a person could reasonably be expected to invest in their community for a number of hours a week.

Thus, by consensually striking a balance between responsibilities and freedom, rule-utilitarianism preserves the right to self-determination and self-interest that is a vital part of welfare. The loss in welfare in the diminished social responsibility would be compensated for by each individual's level of contentment, higher than that under act-utilitarianism. When we go back to the initial scepticism about the practical possibilities of act-utilitarianism we come to another argument, closely tied to the view that moral philosopher's have a responsibility to make their theories relevant.

It is more valuable to adopt a realistic programme and effect some positive change than to star gaze and achieve nothing. The second group of arguments centre on the distribution of welfare, and whether the fundamental assumption of act-utilitarianism, that only the total sum of welfare matters, is correct. Act-utilitarianism assumes that any level of pain, no matter how intense or concentrated in one life may be balanced by a marginally larger quantity of pleasure. A woman may be empowered as a result of a brutal assault, and spend her life campaigning for women's rights.

This cannot make the prospect of women being assaulted any more attractive to us, and rightly so. It is, however, under act-utilitarianism a better history than that in which the woman isn't assaulted. Indeed act-utilitarianism doesn't even require that pleasure and pain are balanced in the same life or even within the same society. Many thousands of Iraqis may die

to preserve the peace of mind of millions of American citizens, even if that peace of mind were misplaced.

This is the Kantian idea of fairness - that each individual has the right to have a life of welfare levels comparative to that of their neighbour. Act-utilitarianism doesn't advocate this, and may even recommend the diametric opposite. Ironically, Mill talks at great length about the support sympathy for our fellow creatures lends utilitarianism - it is precisely this social sense that makes us aware of others in pain, and unwilling to inflict it, and aware of our own entitlement to freedom from pain.

Rule-utilitarianism would most likely condemn the extreme actions that would precipitate an uneven distribution of welfare - an in the case that the distribution were not equal, the fairness of the situation is derived from the consensual nature of formulating the rules. The last group of criticisms of act-utilitarianism concern themselves with what it means to be human, and what qualities give our lives meaning and make them enjoyable.

An obvious empirical answer is our social interaction - humans are social beings, a state that extends beyond not being in physical isolation. We form close and lasting attachments, and many people would evaluate those attachments as being the major source of welfare in life. Act-utilitarianism, with its doctrine of impartiality would require that the special treatment that differentiates these close contacts from all others be abandoned in favour of non-preferential treatment of all other humans.

Here an argument similar to one we have already heard in connection with the potential lost welfare in the implementation of act-utilitarianism. Once <https://assignbuster.com/does-rule-utilitarianism-solve-the-problems-faced-by-act-utilitarianism/>

more act-utilitarianism may be defeating its own principles with its arguments. If humans derive the majority of their welfare from these social attachments, then the principle of utility is going to be furthered by those attachments being maintained. Whether the rest of the principles of act-utilitarianism could survive this contradictory situation is not clear.

Once more, rule-utilitarianism, with its eye on society's ultimate goal - promoting welfare - would be free to advocate preferential treatment when a person is faced with a choice between someone they care for and someone they do not in the name of maintaining the substructures of society, even if welfare in the short term is not maximised. It is clear from the similar nature of all of the arguments that rule-utilitarianism uses in response to the problems with act-utilitarianism that its main defence is its flexibility and that its rules are based on precedent of what has, in human history, given pleasure, and what pain.

This certainly isn't watertight just because it is an attractive alternative to absolutist theories. The flexibility is a double edged sword - when you begin to dilute the principles of utilitarianism, you soon find yourself at the doctrine adhered to now - that of personal responsibility and discretion. Rule-utilitarianism's rules would be, by necessity, so broad that in every situation something of the decision about the path to take would lie with the individuals concerned, and their intuitive moral code.

The very essence of Mill's utilitarianism, to provide an absolute moral imperative in every situation, has been lost. Philosophers chewing their pens have so far opted to plump for an option suspended somewhere between the

two - multi level utilitarianism. This is the view that Crisp attributes to Mill. Essentially absolutism is used in the very difficult situations, and rules based utilitarianism to make the more trivial decisions of everyday life a little less taxing.

The decision of which doctrine to adopt in which situations still lies with the individual, who finds himself once more abandoned by incomprehensive theories and left only with his intuition - the very intuition that Mill would deny he had. Rule-utilitarianism and multi-level utilitarianism, in trying to rescue the school of thought have served only to highlight the fundamental flaws in its foundations. Solving problems only precipitate more that revolve around utilitarianism's bedrock - the greatest happiness, and how on earth we are ever to attain it.