

Act and rule
utilitarianism
philosophy essay



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The ethical theory utilitarianism is a way of making ethical decisions that can benefit others, “ what is the right thing to do?” Being able to determine the consequence of a specific action that has the best outcome for the greatest number of people is ethically right. But, how do you compare between the happiness of a whole town against the abuse and neglect of one?

There are two types of utilitarianism; act and rule. Act utilitarianism refers to the above definition; it is an action that will have an outcome that benefits the most people or promotes more intrinsic goodness than any other action without regard to laws or rules, it is a person’s own choice. For example, if a person donates money to their favorite charity, not only do they feel good about it, but they are contributing to the bottom line that supports and makes many individuals happy.

Rule utilitarianism is not dependent on a specific action that creates the greatest good but it is following a set of rules or set laws that will have the greatest outcome for the greatest number of people. In class we talked about killing another individual, this is a good example of rule utilitarianism because you can say if everyone followed the law no one would have to worry about being killed and this would be the best consequence for the greatest number of people vs. no law and random killing of individuals. I personally lean more toward act utilitarianism as it gives me the choice of whether to act in a certain way or not in a way that I think is ethically right.

In the story of “ One walks away from Omelas” by Ursula Le Guin, the author clearly illustrates utilitarianism as the story identifies with a young child, neglected, and living in deplorable conditions so that the towns people of

Omelas can prosper. Omelas is a very joyous town with townspeople that are all very happy and seem to be living a very pleasant life with little or no rules and have everything they need. The people of Omelas are aware of the child, some even go to see the child or bring their children to see the child.

It is not made clear in the story why the child was placed there or why he has been made to suffer as he is but somehow this child is responsible for the happiness of Omelas but the townspeople are hardly bothered by it. They seem to act as if this treatment of the child is ethical since it brings joy and happiness to the city. A quote from the reading points to this as such, “Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery.” (Le Guin)

The people of Omela understand that if they release the child the happiness of Omelas would be destroyed. They are so afraid of losing their perfect world that are not even thinking about what is ethically right. The people of Omelas dehumanize the child to make it easier for them to accept that it is because of his misery that their town prospers. However, some of the townspeople that were ridden with guilt decided to leave Omelas and walked away. This story is a good example of looking at the greater good and what is ethical. This could be argued as a utilitarian view if the only way Omelas people are happy is if this child suffers.

A follower of Aristotle would not agree with most of the towns people as this story clashes with Aristotle's issues of virtues. The towns people of Omelas knew the treatment of the child was wrong however, none of them tried to actually stop what was taking place, or left town as they were either ridden with guilt or didn't want to feel as though they were contributing to the abuse of the child. Aristotle believes that happiness is never forsaking anything else, happiness is the end, the consequence of outcome of all actions. A happy life includes friendship, knowledge, wealth, health, and virtue. Each of these things contributes partly to total happiness and that if you live a good life you will achieve happiness, this is being just, virtuous, and morally right.

Aristotle might say that the ones who don't walk away are very accepting of the child's suffering but they are not doing what is right and just. By staying they are not acting virtuously, as they are allowing the well being of another human to be responsible for the happiness of Omelas. Would it be virtuously right to leave Omelas and search out happiness where it wasn't for sake of someone else's well-being? I would argue that Aristotle may not agree with either staying or leaving, as both are condoning the abuse of the child. I believe Aristotle would say to stay and do the right thing by the child this would be ethically right.

My personal belief is to always work toward the greater good. In the story "The ones who walk away from Omelas" it was the sacrifice of one for the happiness of many. This forced me to look at Aristotle's virtue point of view along with the utilitarian view which is the greatest good for the greatest number. Looking at this child's misery draws you into the ethical portion

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of utilitarianism which discounts the greater good and I have found that the greatest good is not always the ethical thing to do especially if it puts someone else's well being or happiness at risk.