

Critique of utilitarianism



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Imagine you are spending quality time with your mom on a nice Sunday afternoon. You both decide to go to a restaurant in town, The Cheesecake Factory. As you take your seats, you realize you left your phone in the car. You quickly make your way to your car to retrieve it. On the way back, you spring backwards in confusion. You are on the ground, coughing, and trying to make sense of what had just happened. You realize that the restaurant is up in flames. Without hesitation, you begin making your way back to the restaurant. Since it has very large windows, you are able to spot your mom on the ground on the way back, coughing and wheezing. You also see others on the ground closer to the window. At this moment, you freeze. You realize your mom is the furthest from the entrance and many others are closer to the entrance. You are the only one in the parking lot and are forced to ask yourself, “ Should I save my mom who is all the way in the back or should I save even more people who are located closer to the entrance?” It is natural for us as humans to want to save those closest to us, but to the Classical Utilitarian, saving more people would be the most optimal situation for the whole. According to the Classical Utilitarian, saving many people near the front would bring the greatest overall happiness for all those involved due to more people being connected to the many lives saved. Those connected are therefore happy and relieved of their loved ones’ lives being saved as opposed to only one life saved with less connections than the others. But one has to ask, “ So is it not better to save my mom?” Here lies the biggest issue of the theory that this paper will be critiquing: Utilitarianism requires us to do something humanly impossible, remaining impartial. This is impossible for

humans to do because partiality is intrinsic to the neurological process of learning. These partial thoughts we have are otherwise known as biases, and they are important to have because they help us construct our view of the world (Baumann 01: 45). If it is impossible to remain impartial, as believed by professionals in the fields of cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, then the theory of utilitarianism does not stand.

Utilitarianism is based on the impartial, universal principle of utility, which is to always act in ways that maximize happiness and minimize unhappiness (harm) (Rachels & Rachels 90). In other words, the closer we approximate the happiness of all members of the community, the greater the amount of aggregate happiness. This principle applies to all those involved in the situation. With this, a utilitarian debates which action will yield the greatest happiness or the best consequences. The impact of this action upon his/her own welfare must be regarded as irrelevant, or at most, as equally important as its impact on all the other parties concerned (Rachels & Rachels 107). In other words, the utilitarian is concerned with the maximization of good consequences/happiness, not the maximization of one's own happiness. The important part of this definition is to remain impartial (Rachels & Rachels 108). Utilitarianism requires that person to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested spectator.

When you understand the meaning of impartiality, it appears to be in direct conflict with natural human inclinations. Relationships are a key component of our welfare. If we accept the definition of happiness as “satisfaction of intellectual, mental/emotional, spiritual, and/or physical interests related to well-being, where well-being is survival and thriving” (Craig), how can one

thrive if they do not prioritize the life of someone who helps them reach these aforementioned components of happiness? Saving many lives may promote more aggregate happiness because those who have relationships with them are now saved and happy as well. But how does this promote the individual's own elements of happiness when the prime figure in their life who helps them reach these levels of happiness is dead after they choose a handful of random people over their mother? The answer is that it does not promote happiness for that specific person, because, according to the definition given, those elements of their lives are not thriving. Emotionally, that person will likely be distraught and overwhelmed by guilt, even though multiple other lives were saved. Spiritually, that may or may not oppose his/her religious beliefs.

For example, in the Baptist Christian Church, there is an order given as to whom you should love the most and how you should treat them. This order can be inferred from specific quotes in the Bible that are then outwardly expressed in the church. In Deuteronomy 5: 16, it tells us to honor our parents so that we may live long fulfilled lives (Deut. 5. 16). This verse about loving your own parents succeeds loving the Lord and precedes loving your Christian neighbors in the community. Your parents are ranked third in the list and strangers do not even make the list. So according to this religion, one would not be doing their loved ones justice if they are not prioritized, hence not fulfilling them spiritually within the happiness definition. Here we see that remaining impartial to loved ones is conflicting to one's self interests in attempting to maintain their greatest happiness level.

Like any theory, one has to be able to substantiate claims that accompany that theory. I foresee utilitarians having a potential response to my objection of impartiality within the theory. The utilitarian would defend themselves by saying that one can be partial to family, with the ability to remain impartial overall. So it seems as if there are exceptions to the impartiality requirement. They would allow partiality towards ourselves and others with whom we share personal relationships. This is a contradictory theory once it is dissected. It is supposed to be an impartial moral theory, but it cannot be while also allowing partiality in people's treatment of those whom they share a special connection with. This conflict of only being impartial sometimes shows that this is not a reasonable defense given by the utilitarian. It goes against the fundamental principle of utility to remain partial to those we care about even if it promotes unhappiness and harm.

The flaw of remaining impartial in this theory can be illustrated by exploring another example through the film, *Divergent*. In this film, the city of Chicago is included in an experiment in which inhabitants belong to one of five factions that correlate to different personality types. The protagonist of the film, Tris, fits into every faction, making her divergent. Once those in charge figure out she is divergent, they see her as a threat and try to kill her. One of those who see her as a threat is her brother, Caleb, who believes in the faction system. Despite her brother turning on her multiple times, Tris still saves him from danger because he is the last living family member she has left. The utilitarian would say that she should go against her natural instinct to save her brother and allow him to be killed because his death maximizes happiness for others due to his betrayal. Tris would not be thriving and

surviving in all aspects of her life if she lets her brother die when she has the chance to save him. It goes against her morals and beliefs to not save those she loves, as we come to know in the film. One of the factions she fits in with is Abnegation, displaying kindness and selflessness. Their core belief is 'Them before I.' She is kind to her brother and still puts his life before hers despite his lack of loyalty. Throughout the film, Tris has trouble denying her Abnegation traits. She has an internal struggle to prove to herself that she is not Abnegation. In the end, despite all the efforts to dismiss Abnegation, she still puts her brother first and forgives him, acting the way an Abnegation would. This example illustrates the unconscious desire to care for others as a result of our human nature. It is not in Tris' nature to promote the overall happiness of others in this situation by ridding of her brother, thus showing the flaw in utilitarianism. One cannot always remain impartial when those they care about are involved.

In conclusion, utilitarianism overlooks a very important component of what it means to be human, to care for and prioritize those who are important in our lives. To overlook the common thoughts, feelings, and actions that connect us as humans, is to deny us the ability to care for those who help us grow into who we are meant to be. Humans are social beings who care about the well-being of one another. To require people to remain impartial to promote overall happiness for those involved sounds reasonable. However, people ought to be able to act within the bounds of human nature. To require them to do otherwise is unreasonable and impossible if this argument holds true.

Works Cited

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