Definition: Utilitarianism from Philip's Encyclopedia

Branch of ethical philosophy. It holds that actions are to be judged good or bad according to their consequences. An action is deemed to be morally right if it produces good results. English philosophers Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and J.S. Mill developed the philosophy of utilitarianism during the late-18th and 19th centuries.

Summary Article: Utilitarianism

From Political Philosophy A-Z

Doctrine in moral and political philosophy associated with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and perhaps the most influential philosophical position at affecting public policy. Utilitarians judge the moral value of acts, institutions and/or rules according to their consequences (so utilitarianism is a brand of consequentialism) and particularly according to their contribution to general utility. The famous formula that utilitarians seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number is indeterminate, because it invokes two variables – are utilitarians to prefer greater happiness for a smaller number, or lesser happiness distributed amongst more people? It also gives rise to problems of measurement – whilst it may be possible to compare preferences for one individual, who may be able to opt between different bundles of utility-providing resources, or to say that he is indifferent between bundles, the problem of interpersonal comparison remains. Utilitarians are likely to push for objective and measurable criteria that serve as proxies for utility. But this separates out utilitarianism conceived of as a criterion of rightness and utilitarianism conceived of as a decision procedure.

In political philosophy, whilst utilitarianism does seem to point to some rough ways of deciding about public policy issues through cost-benefit analysis, it has a persistent problem in securing reconciliation with our thinking about justice. Concerned solely with the consequences of our actions, institutions and rules, utilitarians may be impelled, depending on contingent and empirical considerations, to favour unjust social arrangements, such as punishing the innocent or breaking promises. More sophisticated accounts of utilitarianism, such as rule-utilitarianism, may attempt to swerve around this problem by citing side effects of unjust treatment which mean that such treatment is not conducive to maximum utility. But, even if that is the case, they are open to the charge that they oppose injustice for the wrong reasons – that they have ‘one thought too many’ as Williams puts it.

The attraction of utilitarianism in public policy arises from its concern with the actual consequences of political action: utilitarians will prefer the outcome that generates maximum utility, even when this conflicts with other valuable ends. But this means that opponents of utilitarianism must favour sacrificing utility – perhaps sacrificing the welfare levels of real people, making them less happy, fulfilling fewer of their preferences, giving them less of what they want, in order to satisfy the demands of some abstract principle such as justice. In this way, opposition to utilitarianism can have a whiff of sanctimoniousness.

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/utilitarianism
See act utilitarianism; Bentham, Jeremy; consequentialism; Mill, John Stuart

Further reading

- Smart, J. J. C., and Williams, Bernard (1973), Utilitarianism: For and Against, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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