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Prompt #2

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism originated from the revolution, reform, and upheaval that occurred throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In a nutshell, utilitarianism is the idea that we should do whatever is necessary to promote the highest level of happiness that we can. According to this ethical philosophy, happiness should always outweigh unhappiness, and that balance determines whether an action is morally right or wrong. In this paper, I will give a more in depth explanation of the idea of utilitarianism and discuss two possible objections to it. I will conclude my paper by predicting how a utilitarian would respond to the objections and provide my own response to the idea of utilitarianism. Although it is applicable and valid in some circumstances, I will argue that utilitarianism is not the best ethical philosophy because of the problems that arise upon attempting to fulfill the requirement of equal concern, along with its lack of consideration of human rights.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, historical events such as the French Revolution and the fall of the Napoleonic Empire led to many types of societal change, including ethical reform. As the world and its people evolved, so did their morals. Previously, morality had centered around pleasing God or adhering to a set of conceptual rules. However, English philosopher Jeremy Bentham challenged that belief, stating that “morality is about making the world as happy as possible” (Rachels 98). This new way of thinking became known as utilitarianism.

One possible objection to utilitarianism stems from the idea of “equal concern”. This means that everyone’s happiness holds the same value, and that we must treat the happiness of others as we’d treat our own. This can get complicated when applied to real life. According to

Rachels, “faithful adherence to the utilitarian standard would require you to give away all your wealth until you’ve made yourself as poor as the people you’re helping” (116). I believe that giving away your wealth to allow equal happiness would make you unhappy. According to utilitarianism, wouldn’t giving away your wealth be considered morally wrong if it brought you unhappiness? Or would the balance of the giver’s unhappiness with the receiver’s happiness make it acceptable? This is where strict adherence to utilitarian beliefs becomes difficult.

Fulfilling the requirement of equal concern almost seems possible in theory, but one must take into consideration the selfish nature of human beings. I don’t believe that we would be truly satisfied by having the same amount of something as everyone else. We will always crave more, no matter what. We are greedy and we will do anything to be above someone else. We want to be the best; the most powerful, the most successful, the wealthiest. Aside from our selfish nature, we have unique things that give meaning to our lives. Rachels gives an example of a normal person who leads a normal life, not luxurious by any means. This individual has a family, hobbies, and has made a decent living. However, according to utilitarianism, this person is leading an immoral life because “[they] could be doing a lot more good if [they] spent [their] time in other ways” (117). If we lived by the theory of utilitarianism, there would be many problems tied to it, including jeopardizing our basic human rights.

Our rights as humans are given to us simply because we exist. Some are controversial, but these rights are to be protected at all costs. Many people are passionate about issues concerning human rights, and for good reason. No one should be deprived of any of their basic human rights, nor should they be violated for any reason. This may be common sense, but the theory of utilitarianism doesn’t seem to include consideration of basic human rights. Chapter 8 of the Rachels book gives an example of a woman’s right to privacy being violated. In the story, a

woman went to the police station to report a case of abuse and press charges against her abuser. The officer who was handling her case convinced her that it was necessary to take very inappropriate pictures of her. These pictures were not at all useful in solving the case, but the officer spread the pictures around to his coworkers at the police station. The woman's rights were clearly violated. According to utilitarianism, an action is morally right if it produces more happiness than unhappiness. That being said, the officers' happiness and pleasure outweighed the unhappiness of the victim, so it would not be incorrect to assume that a utilitarian would deem the officer's actions as morally right. With this example, it is very clear to see the flaw in utilitarianism and how it does not account for basic human rights. The only concern with the theory of utilitarianism is the overall production of the highest amount of happiness, with no consideration for the price at which the happiness comes.

It is difficult for me to predict how a utilitarian would respond to these objections, since I don't believe that being a utilitarian means you ignore human rights and that you are an exception to the general statement that humans are selfish. However, Rachels provides some utilitarian counterarguments that may serve as responses to the previously described objections. The first is a defense to the objection that utilitarianism is too demanding. Rachels poses the question "isn't it self-serving of us to say that utilitarianism is "too demanding", rather than saying that we should do more to help?" (123). To an extent, this is true. However, giving away hard earned wealth and possessions to ensure equal concern is taking it a little too far. The second looks at the consequences of the actions deemed acceptable by utilitarians. According to utilitarianism, an action is considered morally right if it results in more happiness than unhappiness. Therefore, a utilitarian may cast human rights aside in the case of the abused woman and focus on the fact that the officers' pleasure outweighed the woman's unhappiness. If

the officer gets away with what he did, doesn't that mean that no harm has been done? A utilitarian would argue that this is true. However, regardless of whether he gets away with it, there will still be consequences for the woman, since her right to privacy was violated for the purpose of bringing perverse happiness to police officers. Overall, it is easy to see the flaws in the logic of utilitarian thought. For that reason, I chose to reject the theory and argue against it.

Considering the objections to the theory of utilitarianism that I discussed earlier, I chose to argue against it, simply because it cannot be applied to our everyday lives. Theories like this one are meant to be applied to all situations, but it is clear with utilitarianism that there are some circumstances when the action looks morally right from a utilitarian standpoint, but it violates human rights or has unrealistic standards. I am a firm believer in the notion that human rights are inalienable and granted to everyone, regardless of the happiness that an action against them would bring another person. In cases such as the abused woman, the happiness of the officers is clearly irrelevant from a logical point of view. Who would focus on the happiness that nude photos of a woman would bring to an officer when the woman herself is violated and exposed? In addition, why should we have to give away nearly everything we've worked hard for just so other people can be as happy as we are? These are questions that I asked myself when I formed my argument against utilitarianism, and it appears from the Rachels readings that I would have quite a few philosophers on my side. Although it is applicable and valid in some circumstances, I argue that utilitarianism is not the best ethical philosophy because of the problems that arise upon attempting to fulfill the requirement of equal concern, along with its lack of consideration of human rights. Our world has changed so much since the rise of utilitarian thought, and with that change came a shift in thinking, just like what happened leading up to the beginning of utilitarianism. Today, people are more concerned than ever with their rights and they want to

make sure that they are protected. Therefore, it is time for us to abandon the theory that leaves those rights out of the picture.