

Textauszug zur Vorbereitung auf den Workshop
„Achtsamkeit und ethische Urteilsbildung“

Ethische Prinzipien – Beispiel 3:

Mill' s principle of utility: "Seek the greatest happiness for the aggregate whole."

Utilitarianism is an ethical view widespread in North American society and a notion well developed in philosophy. There are many different varieties, but they all hold in one way or another that we are to determine what is right or wrong by considering what will yield the best consequences for the welfare of human beings. The morally right alternative produces the greatest balance of good over evil. All that matters ultimately in determining the right or wrong choice is the amount of good promoted and evil restrained.

Modern utilitarianism originated with the British philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). Their traditional version was hedonistic, holding that the good end is happiness or pleasure. The quantity of pleasure depends on each situation; it can be equal, Bentham would say, for a child's game of kickball as for writing poetry. Mill contended that happiness was the sole end of human action and the test by which all conduct ought to be judged. Preventing pain and promoting pleasure were for Bentham and Mill the only desirable ends.

Later utilitarians, however, have expanded on the notion of happiness. They have noted that if pleasure is upheld as the one object of desire (in the sense of "wine, women, and song"), then all people do not desire it (Puritans did not), and, therefore, it cannot be the only desired goal. Thus these utilitarians argue that other values besides pure happiness possess intrinsic worth-values such as friendship, knowledge, health, and symmetry. For these pluralistic utilitarians, rightness or wrongness is to be assessed in terms of the total amount of value ultimately produced. For example, after burglars broke into the Democratic Party's National Committee offices in the Watergate Hotel in 1972, the press's aggressive coverage did not yield a high amount of pleasure for anyone except enemies of Richard Nixon. Yet [...] for utilitarians, the overall consequences were valuable enough so that most people considered the actions of the press proper, even though pain was inflicted on a few.

Worked out along these lines, utilitarianism provides a definite guideline for aiding our ethical choices. It suggests that we first calculate in the most conscientious manner the possible consequences of the various options open to us. We would ask how much benefit and how much harm would result in the lives of everyone affected, including ourselves. Once we have completed these computations for all relevant courses of action, we are morally obligated to choose the alternative that maximizes value or minimizes loss. The norm of utility instructs us to produce the greatest possible balance of good over evil.

Actors should focus on "the greatest amount of happiness altogether." To perform any other action knowingly would result in our taking an unethical course.

Two kinds of utility are typically distinguished: act and rule utilitarianism. For act utilitarians, the basic question always involves the greatest good in a specific case. One must ask whether a particular action in a particular situation will result in a balance of good over evil. Rule utilitarians, also attributing their view to Mill, construct moral rules on the basis of promoting the greatest general welfare. The question is not which action yields the greatest utility, but which general rule does. The principle of utility is still the standard, but at the level of rules rather than specific judgments. The act utilitarian may conclude that in one specific situation civil disobedience obtains a balance of good over evil, whereas rule utility would seek to generate a broadly applicable moral rule such as "civil disobedience is permitted except when physically violent."

Although happiness is an end few would wish to contradict, utilitarianism does present difficulties. It depends on our making accurate measurements of the consequences, when in everyday affairs the result

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of our choices is often blurred vision, at least in the long term. For instance, who can possibly calculate the social changes that we will face in future decades in the wake of converging media technologies? Moreover, the principle of the greatest public benefit applies only to societies in which certain nonutilitarian standards of decency prevail. In addition, utilitarians view society as a collection of individuals, each with his or her own desires and goals; the public good is erroneously considered the sum total of private goods.

These ambiguities, although troublesome and objectionable, do not by themselves destroy the utilitarian perspective, at least for those who are intellectually sophisticated. For our purposes in examining media ethics, no moral norms can be considered free of all uncertainties. However, the obvious difficulties with utilitarianism usually can be addressed in round two or three when circulating through the Potter Box for specificity and clarification. Occasionally, in resolving the cases considered in the following pages, utility is the most productive principle to include in the lower right-hand quadrant. In the classic case of Robin Hood accosting the rich in order to provide for the poor, act utilitarianism appropriately condones his behavior as morally justified.