

Unit 3

Utilitarian Ethics and Social Contract Theory

Introduction

Another approach to ethical decision-making sets aside both pure reason and emotion or feeling and instead focuses on what we want, what result of our decision is the most appealing and why. The conclusion that utilitarian philosophers reached was that people want to maximize their happiness (or “utility,” hence the title “utilitarian”) in the decisions they make, and minimize their suffering (or “disutility”). Simply put, people want an outcome that gives them the maximum pleasure, happiness, or something positive, and the minimum amount of anything negative or unpleasant. Making ethical decisions then becomes something of a calculation, where the outcomes of our alternatives are measured against each other.

From the alternatives open to us, when we choose one intended to maximize pleasure or happiness, utilitarians would say we have made the right choice. Whether or not you like the idea of a utilitarian calculation, it is one way to decide between difficult alternatives.

There are, of course, problems with utilitarian ethics, some of which are discussed in chapter 5. For example, what is “happiness”? How do you make an ethical calculation if “happiness” means different things to different people, or across different cultures? How do you choose between possible consequences or outcomes, when in fact we do not have all the knowledge we require—or the ability to look into the future—to know exactly what those consequences will be?

What happens, however, if we step away from believing that ethical principles are reasoned, or grounded in intuition, or found in nature, and start to calculate what we should do? It is a very short step from this to believing that ethical principles are constructed or made. The ethics of a society then become what the members of that society have agreed upon, a consensus that serves as a basis on which they can continue to live together. This is what is referred to a “social contract theory”—our ethical decisions reflect principles that we have, as a society, decided that we need. This is the substance of chapter 7, as Waller works through some examples of social contract theory as applied to ethics, and discusses their strengths and weaknesses.

Learning objectives

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

1. identify basic principles of ethical theory, focusing on utilitarianism and how the pursuit of happiness led to the idea of a social contract;
2. identify, compare and contrast the philosophical approaches to ethics found in the work of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and some objections to a consequentialist ethic; and
3. identify the characteristics of ethical principles that result from a social contract, and some objections to social contract theory.

Assigned reading

Waller, Bruce N. *Consider Ethics: Theory, Readings and Contemporary Issues*. 3rd ed.
Toronto/Montreal: Pearson Longman, 2011.

Chapter 5, “Utilitarian Ethics”

Chapter 7, “Social Contract Ethics”

Optional reading

Waller, Bruce N. *Consider Ethics: Theory, Readings and Contemporary Issues*. 3rd ed.
Toronto/Montreal: Pearson Longman, 2011. Chapter 6, “Pluralism and Pragmatism.”

Learning activities

Completing the learning activities will help you prepare for the assignments and the final exam.

Find the exercises at the end of Waller's chapters with questions for reflection, and be able to answer them. If you have further questions, check out some of the additional readings and sources Waller lists.

Assignment

Make sure you log in and answer the unit question found under the discussion link on the navigation bar, and respond to at least three of your classmates' postings over the three weeks that each discussion topic is open.