

regret contends that we ought to give money away and that it is morally wrong not to do so, rejecting the notion of supererogatory actions and taking the position that if we have the chance to make the world a better place we are morally obliged to take it.

An important element of utilitarian theory is the notion that every person's life and interests count equally with everyone else's (Rachels 1999a: 118). While this sounds appealing, in practice, it would require that we give up our special relationships with family and friends to whom we show speciality and preference (Goodin 1991: 234). Family and friends are not just members of humanity; they are special to us, and the argument that we should show no more concern for their welfare than for anyone else's is quite counterintuitive. Take the example of a parent who allows his child to burn in a building on the basis that others are in the building who should be saved because their future contribution to the general welfare seems likely to be greater than the child's. That parent would not be considered a hero, but rather regarded with horror and contempt and would be considered to have acted immorally.

Rachels (1999a: 116) explains that utilitarians counter these criticisms by pointing out that the arguments are unrealistic because they do not describe real-world situations but are imaginary. It is argued that utilitarianism is a guide for making decisions in the real world and for situations we actually face. Rachels suggests that utilitarianism counters these criticisms by modifying the theory to introduce *rule utilitarianism* and *act utilitarianism*. In the case of the race riot example, rule utilitarianism would ask which general rules of conduct would promote the greatest happiness. A society that

contained a rule against false testimony or one that did not? Would people be better off in the former or the latter society? Clearly, in terms of utility, the former society is to be preferred, and therefore, the rule against giving false evidence would be accepted, and the person should not testify against the innocent man. In contrast, an act utilitarian faced with the same situation would likely give false evidence because the consequences of that particular act would be good.

A final defense against criticisms of utilitarianism is more radical—it essentially asks, so what? It reverses the presumption that utilitarianism is irrational and does not accord with our moral and intuitive common sense by asking “Why should we assume that our feelings are always correct?” and “Why should we reject a rational theory of right conduct just because it conflicts with those feelings?” This defense argues that it is the feelings and not the theory that should be discounted (Rachels 1999a: 119). This defense therefore implies that many of our commonly held moral feelings may be mistaken, and it challenges us to rethink those views and feelings (p. 120).

It is sometimes suggested that consequentialism is a less than efficient way of living and deliberating on issues because it requires long and complicated calculations of utility that tend to make a person overly hesitant and ineffectual (Scarre 1996: 13). Far better for human welfare, it is argued, that people are able to act on simple moral rules, such as keep your promises, pay your debts, and help the needy.

Two examples of the application of utilitarian theory to moral issues are shown in the “A Case of Euthanasia” and “The Treatment of Animals” Closer Look boxes.

A Closer Look

A Case of Euthanasia

Matthew Donnelly, a physicist, worked with X-rays and, perhaps through too much exposure, contracted cancer and became blind. He was told that he had about one year to live and was in constant pain. He decided he did not want to carry on living in that condition and begged his three brothers to kill him. Two refused, but the youngest brother, Harold, brought a pistol into the hospital and shot Matthew to death.

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