

The central normative principle of utilitarianism:

The sole ethically sound end of social organization is the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

If, in fact, the sole ethically sound end of social organization is the greatest happiness of the greatest number (if, that is, the first principle of utilitarianism is true),

then:

1) an action, a policy, an institution, a custom, and so on is a right action, a sound policy, a valuable institution, a good custom, and so on to the extent that it promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number

2) the just or fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation and of social life generally is whichever particular distribution best fosters the greatest happiness for the greatest number

3) we as individual agents ought cultivate in ourselves those values, preferences, habits, patterns of emotional response, and tastes that lead us easily to perform right actions in our day to day lives (given how we reasonably expect our day to day lives will go)

4) when making large choices regarding what sort of person to be or which large social programmes to support, we ought to estimate the expected utility for all affected of each of the options before us and choose that option that has the highest expected utility for all

(The “ought” in points 3 and 4 is the “ought” of ethical duty. From an ethical point of view, we are bound to attempt to be the sort of person whose actions promote the good. Whether we should cultivate ourselves in these ways—whether, that is, we have any good practical reason to care to fulfil our duties—is a different matter.)

But:

Is it true that the sole ethically sound end of social organization is the greatest happiness of the greatest number?

What considerations would properly incline us to believe that the sole ethically sound end of social organization is the greatest happiness of the greatest number?

Are there, on the other hand, considerations that would properly incline us to believe that the greatest happiness of the greatest number is not the sole ethically sound end of social organization?

—That there is another ethically sound end of social organization?

- That the greatest happiness is not an ethically sound end of social organization at all?
- That social organization is not the sort of thing that has ends or is not an object of ethical evaluation?
- That a normative principle cannot be either true or false?

An argument meant to establish that the sole ethically sound end of social organization is the greatest happiness of the greatest number:

1. For each person, whatever that person's particular projects and particular preferences happen to be, that person's sole end is her happiness in life.

(Each person values for their own sakes only those activities, objects, or states of affairs in which she finds happiness; people engage in activities they don't enjoy only in order to ward off states of affairs they would enjoy even less or to clear the way for states of affairs they would really enjoy.)

Thus:

2. For each of us, our one ultimate interest is to live a happy life.

3. From an ethical point of view, no one person's interest to live a happy life is more significant than any other person's interest to live a happy life.

4. Who is happy (and who is unhappy), how many are happy, and how happy they are, are direct consequences of how the burdens and benefits of social life are distributed.

Therefore:

5. From an ethical point of view, the sole end of social organization is the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

What should we think about claim #3?

3. From an ethical point of view, no one person's interest to live a happy life is more significant than any other person's interest to live a happy life.

Could it express a truth? What considerations would properly incline us to believe it is true (rather than that it is false or neither true nor false)?

- “No more significant” for whom?
- Does it make sense to speak of something's significance, but not its significance to someone for something?

Something like claim #3 is important to the argument, but it would seem that that claim can at best express a person's commitment to treat people impartially. Whether it is reasonable of a person to have such a commitment is another matter.

If this crucial premise is not true but merely expressive of a commitment, then the conclusion of the argument, the utilitarian first principle, would seem also to be not true but merely expressive of a commitment.

What authority does the conclusion have with regard to our behaviour? Does it supply us with a reason to be utilitarian in attitude and action?

That we believe that the sole ethically sound end of social organization is the greatest happiness of the greatest number need not in itself move us to action.

Though we might accept the claim as fact, accepting it will leave us cold unless we happen already to care about promoting ethically sound ends.

Suppose the above argument does supply us with a reason for believing utilitarianism is true. Our belief that it is true is not in itself a practical reason for committing ourselves to serving the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

A slightly different argument in favour of the first principle of utilitarianism:

1. Each of us is concerned in all that he or she does with his or her own well-being—each is concerned, that is, that his or her preferences be satisfied.

Thus: 2. For each of us, our own well-being or satisfaction is good in itself.

3. None of us is such that his or her well-being or satisfaction is any more important or significant than is the well-being or satisfaction of any other.

Thus: 4. Our own well-being or satisfaction is no more important than is the well-being or satisfaction of anyone else.

Thus: 5. We are all of equal ethical value; our individual good is no more ethically significant than is anyone else's individual good.

Therefore: 6. The ethically good consists in the well-being or satisfaction of all of us in general.

Therefore: 7. To act rightly is to act in whatever way best promotes the general well-being or satisfaction of interests.

Does this argument establish its conclusion? Again, premise #3 is obscure and might be false or neither true nor false. And, again, the reason with which it supplies us for thinking that ethically right actions are actions that promote the general well-being is not itself a reason for acting in ways that promote the general well-being.

What practical reason could we have for attempting to be utilitarian in attitude and action?

Suppose the utilitarian first principle is neither true nor false (as an ethical or normative principle, it does not describe anything and thus does not describe anything truly or falsely).

Can we find a practical reason why we should be utilitarian, if we are not already so?

Can we find a practical reason that would vindicate our commitment to utilitarianism, if we already happen to find utilitarianism attractive?

Two arguments why you should care to promote the general good:

(A)

1. In a society marked by enmity and resentment, others will not care that they are making your life miserable, and they might even undertake as a project to make your life miserable.
2. You do not want to live a miserable life.
3. By working to promote the general good, you will tend to reduce the amount of enmity and resentment among the people you encounter.

Thus:

4. By working to promote the general good, you will tend to create conditions in which you will enjoy your own life more. (Not only will people cease their attempts to thwart your designs; they might in fact help you to realize them!)

Therefore:

5. You should care to promote the general good.

(B)

1. You are the sort of person made happy and content by the thought that people around you are happy and content.
2. By working to promote the general good, you will increase the level of happiness and contentment among the people around you.

Thus:

3. By working to promote the general good, you yourself will be made happy and content.

Therefore:

4. You should care to promote the general good.