

Critical Rationalist's
Utilitarian ethics

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cr: I like utilitarian ethics

G: is there an inherent conflict of interest between the individual and society ? If so, why? If not, then what's the point of utilitarian ethics?

c: ?

G: utilitarian ethics focuses on the collective. But why focus on the collective instead of the individual? Isn't it because utilitarian ethics hinges on the idea that if everyone sought their self-interest then that is somehow bad for the collective?

cr: Yes utilitarianism does focus on the collective. Greatest happiness for the greatest number, everyone's happiness weighted equally.

G: Does the greatest happiness for the greatest number apply within a family?

cr: yes

G: imagine this scenario. a bunch of kids are playing. 1 kid is mean to the others. so the other kids get away from him. the alone kid cries because he's now alone and he wants to play with the rest of the kids. the parent hears the crying of the alone kid and he learns about what happened. he doesn't hear about the part where that kid was being mean though. and the parent decides that the other kids have to include the alone kid. is this utilitarian ethics in action?

cr: Not necessarily. I think that rewarding the child's meanness will lead to more suffering long term (he will be mean next time). Now, if the parent makes the mean kid play just because the parent doesn't know that the kid was mean, that would still be wrong. The parent wasn't wrong because they were poorly motivated, but just because they had incomplete information.

G: can i draw this conclusion from your explanation? you disagree with an authority using force or threat of force to make people do things against their will because there is always the possibility of the authority having incomplete information.

cr: No. Authorities can sometimes use force. That can be justified in utilitarian terms. The fact that some authorities act with incomplete information (and produce harm) does not invalidate ALL forceful actions performed by authorities.

cr: There is not an inherent conflict, but they often come apart. It is not clear how it is in my interest to donate money to life saving charities to other countries (e.g. Against Malaria Foundation. They make bednets that save lives inexpensively). This would prima facie be required by utilitarianism but not by egoism.

c: I think Africa's problems are political and that kind of charity is like pouring water into a leaky bucket. The real issues here are more about tyranny, which isn't a conflict between individual or group benefit, it's bad in both ways.

cr: Yes that's an interesting factual claim. It might turn out that giving to charities in Africa are on the whole counterproductive. But suppose it factually turned out to be the case that on balance, donating to African charities contributed more to their welfare and did NOT detract from their political progress. Philosophically, what would you say then?

c: i think you could help more people, a larger amount, by addressing the political problems, rather than donating to the victims who are being victimized on an ongoing basis (which is why they're so poor). and i think that can be done with mutual benefit – more civilized, productive countries to trade with.

cr: Yes, and you could be right about that factual claim. Do you think there are no cases in which self-interest and benefiting others come apart? It would be a miracle if that was true.

c: i don't think conflicts of interest exist in any cases. so if you want me to replace this hypothetical with a different one where i agree there's a conflict, i can't do it. this is a standard (classical) liberal position which is also held by Objectivism

Do conflicts of interest exist?
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