

Nicole Villaescusa

Professor Minamide

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### I-Search: Utilitarianism

Joanne Kathleen Rowling, author of the beloved *Harry Potter* series, once said “It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” In her novels, Rowling infuses her plots and characters with this very notion. What may seem like a child’s story about wizards and magic is essentially a life lesson about the different choices we make and the various paths these choices lead us to. Like Joanne Rowling, I also believe that everything we are and eventually become is based on the choices we make.

Lately, I have confronted many difficult choices, some of which my Christian background hasn’t prepared me for. For example, growing up in a Christian household I was taught many things pertaining to the nature of moral decisions and moral acts. However as I grow older, I have become aware of the grey area in my thoughts and have increasingly questioned the doctrine I was raised by. Like most people, I strive to be a good person, one who can reach the end of her existence and say, “Okay, I did that right.” I want to make decisions that uplift mankind and promote the goodness that I believe exists in all of us. Some of the ideas and concepts I was raised with, though, seem to go against what I believe to be a moral decision.

As a result, when I attended my first philosophy class, I was searching for a different doctrine to live by, and when we started our first lesson on Utilitarianism, my curiosity was immediately sparked. It seemed like the perfect way to make a good moral decision: calculate the effects of each act and choose the one that promotes the most happiness. It appeared easy and simple, and I couldn’t think of a possible downside this theory of thought might have. Nevertheless, I had only learned of the general concepts of Utilitarianism when I picked this topic for my project, and my lack of knowledge was evident. I had many questions that needed answering.

When I initially sat down to ponder the direction my paper would take, I decided to begin by reiterating for myself what I already knew about utilitarianism as well as devise a list of

questions I needed to answer. My initial knowledge on the subject, as I would soon realize, was comprised of very little and the questions I wrote down dealt with a vast array of aspects of Utilitarianism. My preliminary understanding of Utilitarianism consisted only of the general outlines of, as I was soon to find out, a very complicated and extensive ideology. Having been briefly acquainted with Utilitarianism in my philosophy class, I knew that this ideology was, at the time it was introduced, a contemporary and improved way of realizing and making correct moral decisions. According to Utilitarianism, a moral act stems from the enhancement of pleasure over pain, and in order to make any moral decision a calculation of the potential pleasure and pain it would bring to every being it affected would be necessary. Consequently, because of my initial lack of knowledge of Utilitarianism, I had a seemingly unending list of questions on the subject. What is the basic history of Utilitarianism? More specifically, who did this philosophy stem from? What did this philosophy stem from? How does Utilitarianism compare to other philosophies of thought (i.e. Thomas Aquinas' Eternal and Natural Law theories)? What are the criticisms of this philosophy and how do Utilitarians address these criticisms? How would Utilitarian thought be applied to controversial ethical issues like animal rights?

As one can see, I had a broad range of questions that I wanted answers to. However, I knew that to address all of these would be too strenuous and propel my paper in many different directions. My hope was that these beginning questions would narrow down during the course of my search into a specific aspect of Utilitarianism I wished to concentrate on. Nevertheless, I knew that no matter what aspect I would eventually focus on, I would want to include a brief history of Utilitarianism. As a result, this is where I started my search.

The first source I examined was a book written by Earnest Albee called the *History of English Utilitarianism*. Although this book was published in the early 1900's (1902 to be exact), I felt that the author, who was an instructor of Philosophy at Cornell University, was exceedingly credible, and because I was only researching the basic history of Utilitarianism, the year in which the account was written seemed irrelevant. Unfortunately, I found the reading to be quite dense, but from what I could comprehend I learned that Utilitarianism spawned from the criticisms of Natural Law theories. Albee relates that theories about law and morality (and here is where he references to Thomas Aquinas) have long since been embedded with the idea of God or a higher power, or as Aquinas put it Divine Law. When separating the church and state became an issue,

philosophers started theorizing about a new way to instill morality into common law since the eradication of church influence on government, in a sense, ripped the moral foundation away from the idea of justice. According to Albee, this resulted in the spilt of opinion on what the foundation of morality should be. On one hand there was Utilitarianism, which gave a more scientific basis to morality, and on the other Natural Law theories, which focused on the supposed “Natural Rights” that mankind was born with (Albee 13-17).

This reading interested me very much because it mirrored my own initial appeal to Utilitarian thought. My immediate liking of Utilitarian thought was a result of the objective and almost scientific means to make moral decisions that increase the overall happiness of mankind, and rid society of the biases that seem to come with any religious doctrine. Therefore, when I was first introduced to Utilitarianism it seemed like a refreshing, universal and modern ideology. However, I soon realized that I was looking at Utilitarianism in a different way from which it was intended. I was applying Utilitarianism to individual choices whereas the early Utilitarian philosophers were proposing a new method of thought for ethics and politics. Despite this though, I felt that many aspects of Utilitarianism could be applied to individual choices, and so I decided that I would continue my research on this topic but shift my focus towards a modern stand point of Utilitarianism which deals with the ethical issues we face today.

While researching the history of Utilitarianism, I stumbled across other sources that emphasized prominent philosophers who devised and contributed to Utilitarian ideology. In order to understand how this philosophy of thought can be applied to modern issues and individual choices, I thought it would be beneficial to dedicate a portion of my paper to clearly state what Utilitarianism entails. Two sources in particular struck me as essential to include in my research.

One of these sources was *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, written by Jeremy Bentham in 1789. I first came across Jeremy Bentham in Albee’s *History of English Utilitarianism*, who credited Bentham with devising the first theoretical account of Utilitarianism. According to Bentham, mankind is ruled by two things, “pain and pleasure” and “it is for them alone to point out what we ought to do as well as to determine what we shall do” (4). After he establishes this, Bentham goes on to explain the “principle of utility” and how it is through this principle that we conclude what a moral act or decision entails. For example,

Bentham writes, “By the principle of utility is meant that... which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever; according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question “ (5).

As I was reading Bentham’s account of Utilitarianism, I had a vague feeling that I had read some of the passages before and when I read these sentences I knew that that I had come across these passages earlier in life, for it was these sentences that first drew me into the concept of Utilitarianism. The “principle of utility’ as well as his conclusion that all things are controlled by pain and pleasure made complete sense to me. It seems that with any decision, law or rule anyone makes, they should first ask themselves ‘What purpose does it serve?’ I felt that asking this question alone would get rid of the many outdated laws we have today. I knew that I had just touched on one of the many aspects that make up Utilitarianism and hoped that further research would enlighten me some more.

The other source I found was very helpful in clarifying some of the questions I had about Utilitarianism. In his article “J.S. Mill’s Revisionist Utilitarianism,” Don Habibi reiterates Jeremy Bentham’s presentation of Utilitarianism and expands on it to include the contributions of other Utilitarian philosophers, most notably, John Stewart Mill. In the beginning of his article, Habibi presents Bentham’s view in, what I thought was, an easier way to read and comprehend it. From this source I learned that Bentham, when he wrote his book on Utilitarianism, took into account that “[p]eople may pursue their pleasures and desire different things, but pleasure is something everyone wants.” Also, that “Bentham believed that pleasure and pain...are quantifiable and can be measured in units. He developed a ‘hedonic calculus’ that allows us to measure the utility of acts and to make comparisons among them...Bentham believed it would be particularly applicable to legislative decision making” (3). Habibi goes on to explain the other concepts that Bentham incorporated into Utilitarian thought. For example, Bentham was a stout advocator of equality and therefore infused his ideology with it. Bentham argued that every sentient beings’ (any life form that can feel pain, human and nonhuman) pain and pleasure should each count for one only. However, Habibi later writes that this causes many outcries of criticisms from opponents of Utilitarianism and that it was later Utilitarian philosophers like John Stewart Mill who would address these criticisms and improve the Utilitarian ideology.

In his article, Habibi clarified and explained many aspects of Utilitarianism that I found hard to comprehend. For example, it reiterated in an easier way the hedonic calculus and how Bentham proposed quantifying human happiness in order to reveal the act, choice, or law that would produce the most happiness, and consequently have the most utility. Also I learned that Utilitarianism isn't an ideology that is set in stone, but one that evolves and changes.

Another characteristic of Utilitarianism that I liked was how equality plays a prominent role. I liked that it removed all the biases and discrimination that often come with other ideologies (especially religious ones) and treats not only every human with equal consideration, but also every other nonhuman that has the ability to suffer. This is what I identify with most about Utilitarianism. From my experience with the Christian community, I have found that not many people care about the suffering of animals, and furthermore justify the mistreatment of animals by writing it off as a God-given right. This upset me the most about my Christian upbringing, and was the reason I set out to find another doctrine to live by. It seemed to me that Utilitarianism would solve many of the moral dilemmas we have today, and more specifically, the animal rights predicament that I related with the most. Therefore, I decided to take my paper into a more modern direction and see how Utilitarianism would be applied to today's ethical issues.

Fortunately, most of the sources I found dealt with the animal rights debate I am so passionate about. I read about one contentious Utilitarian philosopher named Peter Singer who is a well known animal rights advocate. Later, after further research, I learned that his views on abortion and euthanasia also caused a lot of controversy. In an article entitled, "The Peter Principles: A Fellow Philosopher Explains the Princeton Professor's Controversial Views on Human Beings and Animals," found in the Philadelphia newspaper *Inside*, Robert Soloman depicts the hostility that Peter Singer confronts when he relates his views to the public. For instance, Soloman writes, "No philosopher has been in the spotlight as much recently as Peter Singer... The *New Yorker* dubbed him 'The Dangerous Philosopher.' The *New York Times* called him "contentious." The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that there are those who say 'the two words that go best with Peter Singer are Adolf Hitler.' In Germany several years ago, he was so soundly booed and hissed that he could not give a lecture. His life has been threatened " ("The Peter Principles"). This portion of Soloman's article showed me that Utilitarianism is still, after all these years, considered a radical ideology. Like Bentham, Peter Singer also stirred the

emotions of the public with his views; however, what astonished me the most was the fact that his conclusions resulted in a threat against his life. It's hard to imagine what Singer could have said to have angered people so much, but towards the end of the article, Soloman relates Singer's controversial views. He writes, "Over the years, the philosopher has become notorious for his uncompromising attack on all forms of animal abuse, including eating them, wearing them, caging them, tormenting them and ignoring their needs. He defends abortion and euthanasia when the quality of life is far less than the effort to live. Finally, he suggests that we make significant financial donations to save the lives of millions of suffering children around the world" ("The Peter Principles"). Soloman then goes on to explain how Singer uses Utilitarianism to reach his conclusions and form his opinions about ethical quandaries. Particularly, how he uses Bentham's principle of utility and egalitarian features of Utilitarianism to show the selfishness and injustice that plagues the nation and causes the suffering of millions of humans and nonhumans. After reading this article, I completely identified and agreed with the views expressed by Peter Singer, also I felt that it put substance and reason into the arguments I often get into with other people. I have held the views that Peter Singer also holds for a long time now, however I never really knew how to logically and sensibly express them. I feel that Utilitarianism would help me greatly in conveying my views.

After this reading this article I became instantly fascinated with Peter Singer, and wanted to learn more about him and modern Utilitarianism. My curiosity got the best of me and eventually I found many articles that pertained to Peter Singer and animal rights. To my disappointment though, my search was coming to an end, and I knew I could only include a couple of the many sources I found. One of the sources I came across was, ironically, an interview with Stephen Colbert (one of my favorite Comedy Central shows) on *The Colbert Report*. In his ultra Republican persona, Stephen Colbert asks Peter Singer about his views on animals. Despite its comedic and entertaining purpose (and it was very entertaining!), I learned more about Peter Singer's views on animal rights. In his immensely humorous way, Stephen Colbert asks Singer why he holds animals in such a high regard and not plants (or as Colbert puts it, Why is he being so 'anti-vegetable?'). To this Singer replies, "I think beings who can suffer ought to get our consideration because suffering is generally a bad thing." Shortly after this, Stephen Colbert concludes the interview with talk about terrorist monkeys and bestiality. Nevertheless, I think Singer's general message was well received and simply stated. This quote

clearly echoes Jeremy Bentham's observation of equality in his Utilitarian ideology. Singer shows how Utilitarianism applies to animals and how the Christian, republican community (represented by Stephen Colbert) often take offense to secular Utilitarian views.

Another article that I wanted to mention was one that I found in *The Washington Post* entitled, "Morality: All In Your Mind," written by William Saletan. This article gave me an entirely different outlook on Utilitarianism, a somewhat ominous one. William Saletan's article was about the science of Utilitarianism and how when we make moral calculations (or utilitarian) decisions we are using a cognitive part of our brain that is constantly at war with our inherited emotional side of our brain. Saletan goes on to explain this by conveying how people with VMPC (the ventromedial prefrontal cortex) damage are considered "abnormally utilitarian" because they are able to make hard decisions (like killing one to save many) using purely utilitarian calculations without their emotions getting in the way. The fact that these people are disabled, though, he concludes, shows that being purely utilitarian isn't possible for normally functioning adults who deal with and confront their emotions ("Morality"). Saletan eventually ends his article in what I perceived as an ill-omened tone as he explains that the advancement of science will one day make it possible to turn mankind into purely Utilitarian thinkers, who are able to make difficult moral decisions through the use of calculations only.

Although this article was extremely interesting it opened my eyes to what I consider the downside of Utilitarianism. In fact this article made Utilitarianism into something downright frightening, like some future monster that sucks the emotions out of everyone and turns mankind into a robot. Maybe that analogy is a bit extreme but it still reflected my newfound reservations. Previously I had thought that this secular and universal ideology would be a positive thing for this diverse world because it regarded everyone the same and promoted the decision that produced the most beneficial effects for the most people. However, as I pondered the tough moral dilemmas this article mentioned, like killing one person to save many, which Utilitarianism would conclude to be the right decision, I didn't think I could follow Utilitarian thought.

Although there were many things I liked about Utilitarianism, this article opened my eyes to the things I did not. I knew that to stop my search at this point would be unwise and that to understand Utilitarianism fully I would have to look into the criticisms of this ideology. While

researching the condemnations of this philosophy, I came across an article entitled “Thoroughly Modern Mill” that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*. In this article the author, Roger Scruton, elaborated on the shortcomings of Utilitarianism. Scruton writes, “...arguments based on the "general good" and the "good of society" appealed to the conservative imagination of the Victorian middle classes. It seemed right to control the forms of public worship, to forbid the expression of heretical opinions, or to criminalize adultery, for the sake of a "public morality" which exists for the general good. If individual freedom suffers, then that, according to the utilitarians, is the price we must pay” (19). In my opinion, Scruton presents a good argument in this quote as well as one that I didn’t consider at the outset. Bentham’s philosophy does seemingly justify the curtail of individual rights in the name of “the greater good.” However, I remember reading in Habibi’s article that John Stewart Mill also recognized this set back and revised the doctrine that Bentham created to protect the individual’s rights. The fact that Utilitarianism can change and be altered to serve mankind better is still, at least I believe, an improvement to religious doctrines where is it considered taboo to break tradition or alter the rules to fit the times.

I read one more article that informed me on the some other drawbacks of Utilitarianism. This article was about a man named Tadeusz Kotarbinski who voiced his criticisms during the time that Utilitarianism was considered fairly new. In his article, Woldek Rabinowicz translates and clarifies Kotarbinski’s criticisms of Bentham’s ideology. According to Rabinowicz, Kotarbinski formulated four objections to Utilitarianism; however, for the sake of time, I will only relate one. The first objection was that Utilitarianism didn’t take into account the difference between diminishing suffering and increasing happiness. Kotarbinski argued that according to Utilitarianism, an action is considered moral if it produces the most happiness, but what it fails to comprehend is the act of diminishing suffering. For example, what if an act brings additional happiness to four already content individuals but produces no happiness for one suffering individual. According to Utilitarianism the correct moral decision would be the one that produces the pleasure of four people but continues to let the suffering individual suffer. Kotarbinski’s arguments against Utilitarianism were both logical and compelling (Rabinowicz). Unlike Scruton’s article, which seemed more concerned with attracting readers than with the actual act of arguing against Utilitarianism, Kotarbinski presents his criticisms without a condescending manner which, I believe, added to his credibility on the subject. These

shortcomings of Utilitarianism seemed very dire indeed. His arguments persuaded me to think twice about adopting this ideology or at least to go back and research the response to these criticisms.

Lastly I would like to conclude my search with the interview that I conducted with Professor Betty Kiehl of the Philosophy department at Palomar. In my interview, which was conducted through email correspondence, I asked Professor Kiehl questions about Bentham, Utilitarianism and the modern Utilitarian philosophers to better understand my topic. This interview proved to be extremely helpful. Professor Kiehl clarified some aspects of Utilitarianism that I didn't quite understand and provided the names of other prominent Utilitarian philosophers to research in the future. One of the questions I asked Professor Kiehl was if she thought that society would ever accept the Utilitarian way of solving ethical issues. She replied, "Your last question asks whether utilitarianism will ever be an accepted theory. It is already. It is just that we go through cycles and given certain current events, one theory or another best explains best to respond. Right now we are in a period where Rights theory trumps all other theories. It is the process of debating whether we should act in the best interest of the greatest number of people or whether we should respect the rights of the individual that we sort out certain things that are very important. Should we act with good intentions or should we act based on the calculated consequences of our actions? These will always be debated and that is a good thing" (Kiehl). This put the Utilitarian view in a greater perspective for me. Maybe it is a good thing that the world isn't strictly utilitarian. In fact I don't think I could live in a world where all moral decisions are calculated. Although there are many features of Utilitarianism I identify with, there are also some characteristics that rub my moral conscious the wrong way.

In the end, I had learned a lot about Utilitarianism. After my search was complete I felt confident about my ability to comprehend the extensive and complicated ideology I set out to discover. Although I'm sure there are still many aspects about Utilitarianism I'm unaware of or don't quite comprehend as well as I should, I still believe in the amount of time I was given I had learned a good amount. I admit that the topic I picked was a rather difficult one for me. During my search I ran into many dead ends and I felt like I didn't do my sources justice. Each one of my sources had so much information that it was hard for me to decide what to write on and what to leave out. I'm confident that I could write a five page report on each one of the individual sources. Despite this, I hoped that what I did write on I explained clearly and concisely.

Furthermore, I realized that my original opinions and assumptions about Utilitarianism differed enormously from my concluding outlook. Although there are many things about Bentham's philosophy that I like, there are also things that I'm not so fond of which, ultimately, reflects the dilemma I had with Christianity in the beginning. After hearing this, some might think that my research resulted in nothing because, after all, what am I supposed to live by now? But my research wasn't a waste in my opinion. Not only did I learn a lot about a philosophy I knew virtually nothing about, but I also learned a lot about myself. For example, maybe living by one doctrine alone isn't the right path for me. I have never been one to follow the crowd anyways; it almost seems obvious that I should live by my own set of rules about morality. If living only by a religious doctrine won't result in me being satisfied with the choices I've made and being strictly Utilitarian won't solve my problems either, then why not incorporate the aspects of the two that I connect with into my own doctrine? Maybe Professor Kiehl had it right all along when she said, "It is just that we go through cycles and given certain current events, one theory or another best explains [the] best [way] to respond."

What does the future hold for me and Utilitarianism? I'm not quite done researching the subject yet. Despite the enormous amount I have learned, I know there is more. Even though I know I will never be strictly utilitarian, the ideology still fascinates me and I believe that through additional research, I will continue to learn more about myself.

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