

MOTIVE UTILITARIANISM

Motive utilitarianism concerns the utilitarian assessment of motives.

Classical act utilitarianism is typically construed as holding that motives are themselves irrelevant for the deontic evaluation of actions. Intuition suggests that motives are morally relevant, and motive utilitarianism addresses this potential gap by providing utilitarian resources to evaluate motives.

First articulated by Robert Adams in 1976, motive utilitarianism takes motives as the primary evaluative focal point and endorses those motives that yield optimal utility. Thus motive utilitarianism is not, strictly speaking, a deontic view about the moral rightness or wrongness of actions, but instead a view about the goodness or badness of motives. The view holds that the best motives are those that yield optimal utility.

It is certainly not a foregone conclusion that motives to maximize utility are indeed optimal. The situation resembles the paradox of hedonism: being motivated by the desire to maximize utility is a surefire way to thwart one's own enjoyment and thereby fail to maximize it. Herein lies the intrigue of motive utilitarianism: which motives are optimal?

Although motive utilitarianism has received relatively little development in contrast to other branches of utilitarianism, a number of configurations of the view are possible. To begin, the relevant array of

possible motives could be construed as those motives that are humanly possible, or as those motives that are possible for the agent in question. Once the relevant motives have been established, the conditions in which utility is evaluated need to be set: utility could be calculated supposing that all agents, universally, have these motives, or it could be calculated supposing that only the agent in question has the motives, holding all other features of the world constant. Further, one must consider whether transition costs are also relevant: presumably if one does not currently have motives that would be optimal to have, there may be some disutility in cultivating these motives. Should this be counted against the overall utility of the motives, or not? An extension of the view could take a cue from rule utilitarianism, and indirectly generate a deontic theory from motive utilitarianism, according to which right actions are those that an agent would do were he to have the optimal motives.

The central debate concerns whether motive utilitarianism is compatible with act utilitarianism. Adams argues that it is not: he presents a case in which the motivation to enjoy visiting Chartres results in more overall utility than a motivation to maximize utility (1976). In Adams's example, the motivation to appreciate the splendor of the cathedral generates an action that is suboptimal: the tourist lingers too long over one minor artwork and thus makes himself late and causes considerable inconvenience to himself – a wrong action, by act utilitarian standards. Adams takes the

example to show that motive utilitarianism advocates actions that are wrong by act utilitarian standards. That is, having optimal motives can generate sub-optimal actions. As a result, act utilitarianism and motive utilitarianism are incompatible.

Fred Feldman, however, argues that Adams's example proves too much: even straightforward act utilitarianism is subject to similar incompatibilities – an optimal action can necessitate a subsequent action at a later time, which by itself is suboptimal and therefore wrong by act utilitarian standards, yet the overall set of acts is indeed optimal (1993). This argument leads Feldman to reject the notion of privileging any particular evaluative focal point as central to utilitarianism. Indeed, several assessments of the putative evaluative conflict between motives and acts have led to notions of a more global utilitarianism, which aims to avoid the evaluative conflict among focal points by assessing overall lives (Crisp 1992, Feldman 1993, Railton 1988) as opposed to privileging any single evaluative focal point.

An alternative assessment of the moral relevance of motives is proposed by Sverdlik, who argues that the best approach to capturing the moral relevance of motives is strictly extrinsic: the motives of actions is morally relevant by consequentialist or utilitarian standards by having instrumental implications for consequences (2011).

Bibliography

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