COMPARING UTILITARIANISMS

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Abstract:

Act Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism, in one formu-
lation of each, are not extensionally equivalent, that is,
they do not require of an agent precisely the same behavior,
as is shown by Gerald Barnes in "Utilitarianisms", Ethics
82 (1971) 56-64. As a result each theory passes and some-
times fails different utilitarian tests: the comparative
consequences of universal conformity by everyone (distribu-
tively) vs. universal conformity by everyone (collectively).
Barnes argues that the latter is the appropriate test. I
argue that the test which AU passes is the appropriate one,
since everyone, collectively, does not make moral choices.
Moral choices are made by everyone individually.

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Comparing Utilitarianisms

Since the recognition of "Rule Utilitarianism" and "Act Utilitarianism" as distinct formulations of utilitarian ethical positions, there has been argument whether or not they are extensionally equivalent, that is, whether or not they require precisely the same behavior from an agent attempting to conform with either principle.

In a recent note in Ethics[1] Gerald Barnes has compared versions of Act Utilitarianism and of Rule Utilitarianism, arguing that they are not extensionally equivalent and that the difference shows the Rule Utilitarian theory to be superior. I shall agree that his example shows the theories do have different practical consequences, but that he draws the wrong conclusion in supposing he has shown the Rule Utilitarianism to be superior.

Barnes compares the following versions of Utilitarianism:

> AU: An act is right if and only if it would in
> fact produce consequences at least as good as
> those which would in fact be produced by any
> other act available to the agent.

> RU: An act is right if and only if it conforms
> with an ideal set of rules; an ideal set of rules
> is any set of rules such that if everyone always
> did, from among the things he could do, what con-
> formed with that set of rules, then at least as
> much good would be produced as by everyone's
> always conforming with any other set of rules.

Against Richard Brandt's claim that RU is a "specious" form of rule-utilitarianism because the ideal set of rules identified by RU would have just one master--the rule formulated by AU--Barnes argues that AU would not fulfill the conditions required. He gives the example of an oppressive dictatorship against which no one is resisting. In this situation it is true of each citizen that if he were to resist he would achieve nothing, since all his compatriots are acquiescing, and he would probably suffer

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[1]Gerald Barnes, "Utilitarianisms," Ethics 82 (1971), 56-64.

greatly. Thus, his act of acquiescence conforms to AU. But if every citizen were to resist, the dictator would be overthrown, with good consequences far exceeding the loss of life and suffering which would be involved in the overthrow. It is thus possible to think of a rule (e.g., "Everyone should do all he can to overthrow the dictator") such that if everyone conformed to it, more good would be produced.

According to Barnes, critics of RU who have thought RU and Au equivalent have assumed that statements such as "Everyone does what is best" will be true as distributive assertions (i.e., applying to each person individually) when and only when true as collective assertions (i.e., applying to all persons as a group). His example shows this to be false: there will be cases where it is true of each member of the group that he is producing the best possible consequences he can, although it is not true of the group that, as a group, it is producing the best possible consequences it can. He concludes: "When everyone conforms to AU, people are behaving in such a way that the claim 'Everyone is producing the best possible consequences' is true, speaking distributively. But at least sometimes when everyone conforms to AU, that claim is not true, speaking collectively (though it must be if everyone conforms to RU). At least sometimes when everyone conforms to AU, then, we have not achieved the goal which utilitarianism holds up for us: the greatest physically possible amount of human well-being."[2]

In this argument Barnes has located one of the crucial issues in evaluating RU and AU as competing normative ethical theories, but he has come to the wrong conclusion in supposing that it shows RU to be superior. That becomes clear by pursuing the argument one step further. If everyone (collectively) conforms to RU, as good and possibly better consequences result than if everyone (collectively) conforms to AU; but suppose that everyone (collectively) is not conforming to RU. Is a rational moral agent supposed to conform anyway? If so, less than the best consequences may result, as is shown by Barnes's example. There, to conform to RU, i.e., overtly to resist the dictator, is to achieve nothing and suffer greatly. On the other hand, if a rational moral agent conforms to AU, he produces as good consequences as he can, on that occasion, and this is true whether the occasion is as described or whether it is the different situation where others (collectively or distributively) are conforming to AU or to RU or to neither. In

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2 Barnes, p. 64.

each case, conforming to AU is producing as good consequences as he can produce.

The two utilitarianisms pass (and fail) different utilitarian tests. If the test is the comparative consequences of each particular act (by a particular individual in a particular situation), AU passes (analytically) and RU sometimes fails; if the test is the comparative consequences of universal conformity by everyone (collectively), RU passes (analytically) and AU sometimes fails. Which is the appropriate test?

The appropriate test, I would claim, is the one which is relevant to the choices which moral agents are called upon to make, and, by this criterion, AU is the preferred theory. It would be better if everyone (collectively) would resist the dictatorship, but everyone (collectively) does not make moral choices. Moral choices are made by everyone individually. Each agent must decide among the options open to him. If others are not overtly resisting the dictator, the choice of everyone resisting is not open to him. To base his decision upon the options which would be open if he were deciding for everyone (collectively) is unrealistic.[3] To the extent that one's behavior influences the behavior of others, one should include the consequences of the behavior of others, to the extent that it is affected, in calculating the consequences of one's own acts. One cannot overthrow a dictator single-handed, but if there are opportunities to organize other citizens into an underground, and the expected utility in the prospects of a successful revolt by the group so organized is greater than the expected negative utility involved in the risks of such activity, then such acts of resistance are justified on act-utilitarian grounds. If, on the other hand, there is nothing an individual can do which has higher expected utility than to acquiesce, then acquiescence is reasonable and any other policy is unreasonable.

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[3] David Lyons illustrates such a situation with the example of a stalled car requiring five to push it when only three are willing: "Obviously, the silliest thing one could do in such a case, where five must push for any good effect and only three are willing to do so, is push anyway." David Lyons, Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 131.

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