

Moral Objectivism and Moral Utilitarianism

Xuanze Shi^{1,a,*}

¹Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, United States, 27109

a. shix20@wfu.edu

*corresponding author

Abstract: Morality is the standard that can guide and restrict the behaviors of people, and it has played an important role during the past centuries. Two questions remain unsolved by philosophers. The first problem is the existence of objective morality and if there is such an objective morality, the other problem is the content of morality. It is important to discuss these problems because they can play a significant role in helping people understand and develop the right morality. For these two problems, the author aims to argue that moral objectivism and moral utilitarianism are true. For objectivism, the author will argue the problem of lacking such an objective morality. For utilitarianism, the author will explain its meaning, argue against several objections, and present its application in his personal life. This paper argues that moral objectivism and utilitarianism are true.

Keywords: morality, moral objectivism, moral utilitarianism, moral subjectivism, moral egoism

1. Introduction

In the debate on the existence of objective morality, some philosophers believe that there are moral rules that are objectively true, which are moral objectivism. On the other hand, some philosophers believe that there are no such objective moral rules, and they believe that morality is dependent on individuals or cultures, which are individual subjectivism and cultural subjectivism. Philosophers who believe that there are objective moral rules are divided into different groups, and they believe in different moral rules. One of the famous groups holds the view that morality should aim to maximize the overall well-being of all creatures, which is moral utilitarianism. The article mainly focuses on the existence of an objective moral standard and the content of such a moral standard. The method used in this article is reflection, which is used for revealing the problems from different arguments. Research on morality can be significant since it can help people have a better understanding of whether moral rules exist and what is morality, which can help people to develop their morality and behave morally.

2. Concept Introduction

Moral objectivism believes that moral standards are objectively true and apply to everyone in every circumstance[1]. These moral standards will not change due to the differences in people's time, situations, and thoughts. Moral objectivists believe that moral rules do not change with the opinions of people[2][3]. Moral relativism believes that moral standards are different for different individuals and societies. These moral standards are related to individuals' thoughts or societies' cultures, which

refer to individual moral relativism and cultural moral relativism. Moral relativists believe that moral rules change with the opinions of people.

3. Problems of Cultural Moral Relativism and Individual Moral Relativism

For cultural moral relativism, people can belong to or be influenced by different cultures. Some people have mixed cultural backgrounds and belong to more than one culture. In some cases, these different cultures will have different moral standards for the same thing, and some moral rules are even opposite. Thus, for people who are influenced by more than one culture, cultural moral relativism does not apply to them. For example, it is considered impolite and disrespectful to stare at other people's eyes while talking to them in China, but the same act is also considered to show paying attention while talking in America. People who belong to both Chinese and American cultures will face problems if cultural relativism is true. Therefore, cultural moral relativism is problematic.

For individual moral relativism, everyone's moral rules will have the same significance, and that can also lead to significant issues. Since everyone's moral rules are equally significant, there is no rightness or wrongness to moral rules. This implies we need to accept some extreme opinions on morality. For example, a serial killer may believe that killing innocent people for fun is morally acceptable. Such an opinion will be rejected by most people, but according to individual moral relativism, such an opinion should also be treated equally, which is hard to accept. Furthermore, because every moral rule is considered equally right, there is no right or wrong moral rule. Everyone will follow their own moral rules and there is no way to say other people are unmoral, which makes morality itself meaningless. Once different people reach out to contradiction or disagreement, there is no way to determine who is morally right. Therefore, individual moral relativism is also problematic. Both kinds of moral relativism are problematic. There are too many problems raised by the differences in morality according to differences in people's thoughts. Thus, moral standards should not be subjective and should not change according to different individuals' thoughts or different societies' cultures, instead, they should be objective. Therefore, moral objectivism is true.

4. Utilitarianism

4.1. Advantages of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism believes that if an action can maximize overall well-being, then such an action is morally required[4]. The action that can contribute the most to overall well-being is morally required. Any other actions that contribute less to overall well-being will be considered unmoral actions. The term "well-being" used by utilitarianism can also be understood as "happiness" or "pleasure," which are considered the basic goods that people aspire to. Utilitarianism believes that well-being is the only goal of people, so morality should help people to promote and maximize their overall well-being. This overall well-being is considered in the long run, instead of short-run happiness or pleasure[5].

Utilitarianism not only applies to human beings but considers all creatures that can feel pain, which means people should also take animals into account[6]. Utilitarianism treats every creature equally, which means every moral action should not consider any individual, but only all creatures. Utilitarianism also does not offer any specific moral rules, but it requires people to take actions that can maximize their overall well-being all the time. This implies that there is no moral rule that is always true[7]. The only standard of utilitarianism is to promote overall well-being the most.

The objection against utilitarianism will argue that it requires people too strictly and it is too hard for people to be moral, so people can hardly ever follow this moral standard. The objection will argue that since there is only one action that can maximize the overall well-being for every case, there will be too many actions that cannot maximize the overall well-being. Among all those unmoral actions, some actions will promote overall well-being but cannot maximize it, and the objection will argue

that considering such actions as unmoral will be too strict. So, there are too many unmoral actions but too few moral actions, which makes it too hard to be moral according to utilitarianism.

The objection will also argue that it is too hard to choose the action that can maximize overall well-being. Because utilitarianism is aimed at maximizing overall well-being in the long run instead of the short run, people need to make predictions about which actions can benefit the most in the future. Such predictions can be extremely hard to make. For example, a college student is considering whether he should major in biology or computer science. The student chose to study biology because he believes that biology technology will be used in many areas in the future, and that can promote overall well-being in the greatest way. However, ten years later, the development of computer science technology on artificial intelligence can even replace all the work done by biologists, which means learning computer science is the better choice that can promote overall well-being. But there is no way for the student to know what will happen in the future so he made a “wrong” decision of his action, which will be considered unmoral by utilitarianism. So, it is nearly impossible to predict the greatest promotion of overall well-being in the long run.

On the other hand, the objection will also point out that it is too hard to compare the amount of promotion each action makes. The promotion people make to overall well-being is not a specific number or even a countable value, instead, well-being is something abstract and cannot be measured in a specific way. So, it is hard to compare different promotions caused by different actions. For example, a businessman is considering whether to donate his property to a school or a hospital. Both donations can help schools or hospitals improve a lot, but there is no way to compare the promotion of overall well-being caused by these two donations. Since it is hard to compare the improvement of overall well-being, it is also hard to choose the action that can maximize overall well-being.

4.2. Response to Possible Objection

Utilitarianism sets up strict moral rules for people since it believes that the action that can maximize overall well-being is morally required, and any other actions are morally wrong. But strict moral rules can also be good moral rules. Even if it can be difficult to maximize overall well-being, it still sets up a moral standard for people’s actions, which is that people need to promote overall well-being as much as they can. It is true that in most cases, people cannot make the correct prediction about long-run well-being and cannot compare the different amounts of promotion of well-being but considering well-being for all creatures instead of individuals and considering well-being in the long run instead of the short run are still significant ideas of utilitarianism. The moral rule offered by utilitarianism can indeed be hard to follow, and most actions of people will be considered unmoral, but it is still significant for people to act towards the direction and goal given by utilitarianism. The reason why people need moral rules is not that people need a moral rule to be “moral,” but because people need a moral rule that can instruct them on how to behave.

5. Discussion

The idea of utilitarianism makes me reflect on my lifestyle, which is unmoral according to utilitarianism. In the beginning, I felt disappointed in my life and my actions because they were unmoral according to utilitarianism. For example, I like playing video games and choose to spend money on them. But according to utilitarianism, I should consider the overall well-being of all people and animals instead of only myself. I will promote much more overall well-being if I spend time laboring or volunteering and donate money to people in need. I eat meat every day, which means it causes animals death and pain. I will promote much more overall well-being if I do not eat meat from animals. I am also studying abroad and paying school tuition. I will promote much more overall well-being if I choose not to go to college but give my tuition to charity. These thoughts always confuse

me since it seems like every action and decision I have made in my life can have a better replacement that can promote more overall well-being, and that makes me feel like I am unmoral. I believe utilitarianism is true because it advocates for people to think and act for overall creatures instead of individuals, for the long run instead of the short run, and others instead of ourselves. However, my lifestyle contradicts utilitarianism. I want to be moral according to utilitarianism, but it is nearly impossible to do that. It is too hard for me to stop playing video games, stop eating meat, and stop studying in school. Because I realized I am unmoral according to utilitarianism and I also hardly ever change my actions to become moral, I felt disappointed and ashamed of myself in the beginning.

Two perspectives can help me overcome my worries. The first way is to think about the improvements I can make[8]. Even if I cannot change all of my actions overnight and become a moral person, I can improve my morality. For example, I played fewer video games during the summer, and I spent more time voluntarily teaching students in middle school and helping with their schoolwork. I ate less meat but more vegetables and fruit in the past few months. I also worked a part-time job and donated all the money to a charity that helps poor families. Although I should not be considered a moral person by utilitarianism, I can promote much more overall well-being than I used to. I am not moral according to utilitarianism, but I am getting closer to being a moral person, which is positive and meaningful. So, this perspective vanishes my worries that I can never be a moral person and makes me realize my improvements are meaningful.

Another way is to think about the promotion I can get in the long run[9]. Even if my actions result in fewer overall well-being promotions in the short run, I can imagine the potential overall well-being that I could probably promote in the future[10]. For example, I believe playing video games is a waste of time. But if I play video games for a short time every day to relax, it can help me change my mood and make me even more efficient while I am working and studying. In the long run, playing video games as a form of relaxation can be a good thing to do. If it can help me be more efficient in some ways, it should be considered a moral action. I eat meat from animals, and that can cause pain to them. But eating meat may also help me to be healthier and allow me to do more work that can contribute to the overall well-being of all creatures. It is possible that by eating meat I become a stronger person, and even though I cause pain to animals, I may have a greater promotion of overall well-being in the long run. So, eating meat from animals can also be moral in some cases. I also believe that using my tuition to help others in need could be an action that can maximize the overall well-being of all creatures, but it is also possible that after being educated in college, I will become a person who can help more people and promote greater overall well-being.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that moral objectivism and utilitarianism are true. I agree with utilitarianism that people should only be concerned about the overall well-being of all creatures in the long run. Even though there are objections to utilitarianism, I believe it is still true since people should focus on improvement and think about the future. At present, there are still some limitations to the paper. For example, the literature cited is relatively small. In the future, more literature and facts will be combined to discuss this topic in more depth.

Acknowledgment

My Greatest thanks to my professor who taught me Virtue and Ethics at Wake Forest University, instruct me to make great processes in the academy, and guide me in fields of philosophy.

References

- [1] Beebe, Qiaoan, R., Wysocki, T., & Endara, M. A. (2015). Moral Objectivism in Cross-Cultural Perspective. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 15(3-4), 386–401. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685373-12342157>
- [2] Gunnar Björnsson. (2012). Do “Objectivist” Features of Moral Discourse and Thinking Support Moral Objectivism? *The Journal of Ethics*, 16(4), 367–393. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-012-9131-9>
- [3] Zijlstra. (2019). Folk moral objectivism and its measurement. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 84, 103807. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2019.04.005>
- [4] Trémolière, & Gosling, C. J. (2021). Association of natural sleep with moral utilitarianism: No evidence from 6 preregistered studies. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 28(5), 1726–1734. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-021-01945-6>
- [5] Sarkissian, & Phelan, M. (2019). Moral objectivism and a punishing God. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 80, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.08.012>
- [6] Gustafsson. (2021). Utilitarianism without Moral Aggregation. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 51(4), 256–269. <https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2021.20>
- [7] Bègue, & Laine, P.-J. (2017). Moral Utilitarianism and Attitudes Toward Animals. *Ethics & Behavior*, 27(3), 173–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508422.2016.1162720>
- [8] Hartner. (2020). Moral Context, Moral Complicity, And Ethical Theory. *Sats (Aarhus)*, 21(2), 179–198. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sats-2020-2011>
- [9] Kaplow, & Shavell, S. (2007). Moral Rules, the Moral Sentiments, and Behavior: Toward a Theory of an Optimal Moral System. *The Journal of Political Economy*, 115(3), 494–514. <https://doi.org/10.1086/519927>
- [10] CRISP. (2010). VIRTUE ETHICS AND VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY. *Metaphilosophy*, 41(1-2), 22–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2009.01621.x>