

OBLIGATION

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This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in James E. Crimmins (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Utilitarianism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 379-382.

To be under an obligation to do something is to be required, or bound, to do that thing. Accordingly, the relationship of obligation to utilitarianism appears, on first blush, fairly straightforward.

Utilitarianism holds that, among the options open to an agent, acts are right insofar as they tend to maximize (or conform with rules that maximize) overall utility. Thus utilitarianism is typically held to ground a moral obligation to do those acts (or follow those rules) that maximize utility.

Critics have contended, however, that the notion of obligation creates problems for utilitarianism. On the one hand, opponents have charged that the theory, at least in its act utilitarian form, is unable to provide grounding for a large class of genuine obligations, such as promise keeping. On the other hand, some have objected that for utilitarians everything is obligation, and that there is no room left for the merely permissible, or for the supererogatory. Thus for converse reasons, critics have argued that the notion of obligation exposes deep inadequacies in utilitarian thinking. And not surprisingly, utilitarians have offered a variety of responses to these charges.

First, some critics have charged that act utilitarianism cannot account for the bindingness of certain kinds of obligations, such as promise keeping. Because act utilitarianism is essentially a forward-looking account, the worry is that it cannot be the source of obligations grounded in what has already transpired. We typically believe that a promise confers an obligation (at least a presumptive one) on the promiser independently of whether keeping it will produce the greatest overall utility. Act utilitarianism, opponents argue, cannot account for this—if breaking the promise produced even slightly more overall utility than keeping it, act utilitarianism would apparently endorse breaking it. W.D. Ross

(1930), for example, found this conclusion counterintuitive: “We should, I fancy, hold that only a much greater disparity of value between the total consequences would justify us in failing to discharge our *prima facie* duty to A. After all, a promise is a promise, and is not to be treated so lightly as the theory we are examining would imply.” (p.35) Ross, then, is not claiming that considerations of utility could never override the obligation to keep a promise, only that the increase in utility would need to be substantial, and that the obligation to keep the promise would be an obligation nonetheless, even when overridden. Philosophers today refer to the sort of obligation Ross has in mind here—which remains a genuine obligation even if it’s overridden—as a *pro tanto* obligation rather than a *prima facie* obligation.

Although in the passage above Ross focuses on promises, this general line of objection may apply with respect to other kinds of obligations. Political obligation, for instance, the general obligation to comply with the laws of one’s political community, is another example of an obligation that we may think remains at least presumptively binding even when in particular instances violating the law may maximize utility. The worry, then, is that utilitarianism is unable to account for the general bindingness of certain kinds of obligations even in cases when honoring them would not maximize utility.

One line of response to such an objection would be to explain our intuitions about the bindingness of such obligations in utilitarian terms. Jan Narveson (1967), for instance, has argued that a promise creates an expectation that would not otherwise exist. He writes, “Consequently, if I default, it is more serious than if I hadn’t promised, because this expectation is then disappointed.” (pp.192-3). On Narveson’s view, then, promises do carry special weight, although this weight is best explained by appeal to utilitarian considerations.

Another option is to endorse rule utilitarianism rather than act utilitarianism. On a rule-utilitarian account, the moral obligation to keep promises stems from the fact that the rule requiring promise-keeping (or fulfilling agreements or contracts, or complying with laws) is one of those rules whose general acceptance maximizes utility (see Hooker, 2011, esp. pp.244-50). In fact, even those

who endorse an act utilitarian account of the rightness or wrongness of actions may endorse following rules of thumb as a decision procedure, insofar as this brings about better consequences than calculating utility on a case-by-case basis (see Hooker, 2000, pp.142-4; Sidgwick, p.413).

Utilitarians might also account for the bindingness of promises by adopting a pluralistic account of value, such as G.E. Moore's "ideal utilitarianism" (1903). If, in addition to pleasure or happiness, utility is understood to comprise values such as honesty, fidelity, or others, then utilitarians would straightforwardly have the resources to explain the importance of keeping promises, even in cases when these actions do not maximize overall happiness. It should be noted, however, that opinions differ about whether such pluralistic conceptions are properly called utilitarian rather than, more generally, consequentialist.

A second obligation-centered objection often raised against utilitarianism is that the theory is overly demanding. Specifically, critics charge that every action is either morally obligatory, if it maximizes overall utility (or is in accord with utility-maximizing rules), or morally prohibited, if it does not. Thus the worry is that utilitarianism leaves no room for acts that are merely morally permissible (neither obligatory nor prohibited). Similarly, there appears to be no room for morally heroic, or supererogatory, acts (acts that go above and beyond the call of duty). Insofar as most people tend to believe that there are acts that are merely permissible or supererogatory, critics claim that utilitarianism's inability to account for such acts shows the theory to be inadequate (Baier, pp.203-204; Brandt, p.276; Murphy, esp. pp.9-33; Kagan, esp. pp.1-3; Pettit, pp.163-9; Scheffler, pp.7-11).

Peter Singer's utilitarian account of our obligations to the global poor has become a standard target of the demandingness objection. In his seminal article "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (1972), Singer contends that (1) "suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad", and (2) "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it (p.231)." Singer then argues that it is in our power to prevent the suffering and deaths of impoverished individuals without

sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance. Thus given the current state of the world, he writes, it follows “that we ought, morally, to be working full time to relieve great suffering of the sort that occurs as a result of famine or other disasters.” (p.238). Singer’s response to the demandingness objection is essentially to bite the bullet, to maintain that we do have quite demanding moral obligations to work to increase overall utility, even if this requires significant sacrifice of our own interests (see also Unger, 1996, and Kagan, 1989).

Still, the demandingness objection is intuitively powerful, and many have been unwilling simply to accept that utilitarianism requires so much of us. Some have instead responded that our obligations to work to relieve the suffering of others extend only to what would be required if others also met their obligations. That is, I am only required to do my fair share to maximize overall utility (Murphy, pp.74-116; Pettit, pp.166-69). Understood in this way, utilitarianism may not seem unacceptably onerous. In fact, it may now not be demanding enough. If two children are drowning and I can save both at little risk to myself, then it appears that I have an obligation to do so, even if someone else equally capable is standing next to me but is unwilling to do her “fair share” (Streumer, pp. 359-362).

Another response is to appeal to a rule utilitarian account of our moral obligations. Brad Hooker (2000), for instance, contends that rule utilitarianism must take account of the various costs of internalizing a given rule. He claims that there would be significant costs involved — in “time, energy, attention, and psychological conflict”—in getting people to accept very demanding rules about helping others. Such costs may “be so large that trying to get each new generation to internalize a completely impartial altruism could not plausibly be thought to maximize expected value (p.166).”

A different sort of response is to give up the notion of utilitarianism as a maximizing doctrine. Instead of a maximizing view, one might endorse satisficing, according to which we are required to act to produce sufficiently good, albeit perhaps not optimal, consequences (Slote, 1984). On this view, we may have obligations to help others in need, such as the global poor, but we do not bear the constant

utility-maximizing burden that critics find so onerous. Alternatively, one might defend a scalar account, such as the one developed by Alastair Norcross (2006). Like a maximizing account, Norcross's scalar consequentialism holds that for any two actions available to a person, it's better to do the one that produces the best overall consequences. Unlike a maximizing account, however, the scalar view does not make claims about the act's rightness, or obligatoriness, or the wrongness of not doing it.

Others have responded to the demandingness charge by developing agent-relative accounts, according to which the rightness of actions is a matter of how much good they will produce from the perspective of the agent. On such a view, it may be permissible to give some priority to one's own projects and commitments, rather than always aiming impartially to produce the best consequences overall (Portmore, 2003). It is a controversial matter, however, whether agent-relativity is consistent with utilitarianism or, more broadly, consequentialism (Portmore, 2001).

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See also Act Utilitarianism; Consequentialism; Brad Hooker; Maximization; Rule Utilitarianism; Satisficing; Scalar Utilitarianism; Peter Singer; Supererogation.