

The Influence of Utilitarianism on Moral Behavior and Its Mechanisms

Puyiming Yang

Zhengzhou No.7 senior high school, Henan, China

201004010235@stu.swmu.edu.cn

Abstract. This study explored the influence of utilitarianism on moral decision-making and investigate how it addresses the moral dilemmas between intention and outcome. This study aimed to explore the influence of four mechanisms - empathy, sense of responsibility, moral stance, and universalization principle - on the relationship between utilitarianism and moral behavior. Firstly, the present study reviewed and analyzed literature to deepen our understanding of the role of these mechanisms in moral decision-making. Secondly, we will investigate how utilitarianism shapes and influences individual moral behavior through these mechanisms. Specifically, the present study examined how empathy inspires individuals to understand and care about the situation of others and promote helping behaviors; how sense of responsibility makes individuals aware of the impact of their actions on others and society and prompts them to exercise moral responsibility; how moral stance affects individual choice and behavior in moral decision-making; and finally, how the universalization principle encourages individuals to put themselves in other's shoes and think about the consequences if everyone engaged in the same behavior. Through an in-depth study of the interaction between these mechanisms and utilitarianism, we can enhance our understanding of moral behavior and utilitarianism and provide substantial guidance for promoting kinder and more just individuals and society.

Keywords: Utilitarianism, moral behavior, empathy, responsibility, moral stance, principle of universalization.

1. Introduction

The relationship between utilitarianism and moral behavior is an important topic in the field of moral behavior research. Utilitarianism holds that the most correct action is to produce the greatest overall benefit or happiness [1-3]. When assessing whether an act is ethical or correct, the focus should be on the consequences or consequences of that behavior [1-3]. Personal moral behavior refers to a person's compliance with social moral norms in daily life, distinguishing between good and evil, and treating things in a just, fair, and respectful way to others [4]. Ultimately, it involves respecting the rights and obligations of natural law. An individual's ethical behavior is generally consistent with social expectations and legal norms, while also demonstrating respect for the rights and dignity of others. This research explores the relationship between utilitarianism and personal morality. In the context of the famous Milgram obedience experiment, the mechanism by which utilitarianism influences moral behavior is introduced. The purpose of this experiment is to investigate the degree of obedience to authoritative commands and to understand whether individuals are willing to inflict pain on others. The experimental design consisted of a participant pretending to receive an electric shock and an experimenter playing the role of an authority figure, gradually asking participants to increase the intensity of the shock [5]. This experiment revealed a common tendency for people to obey authority. From a utilitarian perspective, whether an action should be acted on depends on whether it brings the greatest overall happiness [1-3]. In the experiment, subjects could hear the cry of a shocked person, which was supposed to trigger empathy. However, under the influence of authority, they suppressed their own empathy and continued to experiment. Authorities told participants that all results were the responsibility of the experiment, reducing their sense of responsibility. Their moral stance was suppressed by the "scientific" and "authoritative" nature of the experiment. Participants may choose to blindly obey orders without considering their own moral principles to avoid short-term conflict and stress [5]. Together, these mechanisms cause subjects to

violate their intrinsic morality and obey the orders of the experiment. Subjects in utilitarian experiments did not stop it for two reasons: their behavior and authority or pressure to achieve "happiness maximization." Based on this experiment, this paper explores the relationship between utilitarianism and individual moral behavior from four aspects: empathy, responsibility, moral stance and universal principles. This article will discuss these four points.

2. Mechanisms

2.1. Empathy

Empathy is one of the mechanisms that influence utilitarian moral behavior. Empathy, also known as emotional empathy, requires a mental process of empirical understanding. It refers to the ability to sense the emotions of others, to understand the circumstances in which they find themselves, and to feel as if they are experiencing the same emotions [6, 7]. Empathy is an important social skill in relationships that can help individuals better understand others and strengthen social connections [6]. Empathy is not compassion, comfort, or charity. It is about recognizing the value of others and respecting their aspirations, while also accepting one's own value and acknowledging one's own needs. [6, 7] Empathy is a form of communication, a two-way heart-to-heart communication that involves the ability to feel the emotions and experiences of others. In ethical decision-making, empathy can help people better understand the emotions and needs of others, which leads to more ethical decisions [8]. In utilitarianism, empathy can help us anticipate and understand the impact of our actions on others. This allows us to make decisions that are more favorable to most people. From an empathetic perspective, it can help individuals better understand and feel the needs and happiness of other [7]. In the pursuit of profit maximization, empathy can help individuals consider the emotions of others, making moral behavior not just a profit-driven behavior, but a genuine care and respect for others. Therefore, when deciding to "maximize happiness," individuals need to consider the feelings of others. In this sense, utilitarianism enhances the individual's capacity for empathy. Therefore, empathy can be used as a mechanism for applying utilitarian principles that can help people consider the interests and needs of others in moral decision-making, thereby promoting ethical behavior. For example, the famous Stanford Prison Experiment shows that empathy can help people better understand the needs and feelings of others, consider the interests and needs of others, and thus promote ethical behavior. Participants were divided into two groups, one of which had to decide on a large gift for another stranger. One group received empathy training before watching a video about another stranger's touching story [9]. The results showed that participants in the empathy training group were more willing to share gifts because they were able to better understand the feelings and needs of other strangers, thus taking into account their own interests and needs in ethical decision-making. Therefore, empathy can be seen as a mechanism for applying utilitarian principles that can help people consider the interests and needs of others in moral decision-making, ultimately promoting ethical behavior.

2.2. Responsibility

Responsibility is one of the utilitarian mechanisms that influence moral behavior. Responsibility is an attitude towards a task that involves emotions and a personal willingness to fulfill their obligations. It also includes the recognition and recognition of the obligations of individuals as members of society [10]. Specifically, responsibility is a person's ability to actively recognize and take responsibility for his or her own actions and for his actions, as well as for his or her actions, nature, and humanity [10]. Responsible individuals can bravely face reality, acknowledge the consequences of their actions, acknowledge their shortcomings, and take corrective action [10]. Liability can be divided into two types: active liability and passive liability. Active social responsibility means that members of social groups actively assume moral obligations to others and society, engage in beneficial behavior, pursue and maintain truth and justice, and take moral obligations seriously as a guide for their own ideals and behaviors [10]. In contrast, passive social responsibility refers to the fact that members of a social group do not actively assume their moral

obligations to others and society, engage in harmful behavior, and evade or evade their moral obligations to others and society. Responsibility refers to our awareness and sense of responsibility for the consequences of our actions [10]. In the ethical conduct of individuals, taking responsibility means considering the possible consequences of one's actions and making careful decisions before taking action [1, 10]. In terms of responsibility, utilitarianism reflects a sense of responsibility. Utilitarianism makes it clear that our actions must include consideration of others or the collective, which can enhance individual responsibility [1, 10]. This allows individuals to make moral decisions by fully considering whether their actions will harm the interests of others or society, thus better realizing the utilitarian baseline principle of "minimizing suffering" in practice [11]. Responsibility is an important part of an individual's moral character. [1, 5, 11] It is the recognition by the individual of his moral obligations in thought and action, and a positive expression of the fulfillment of these responsibilities. Responsibility is the basis of ethical behavior. When individuals lack responsibility, it is difficult for them to engage in ethical behavior [11]. Ethical conduct refers to actions taken by individuals in a given situation that meet specific moral standards. Ethical behavior has a high sense of responsibility and moral awareness, considering not only the interests of the individual, but also the interests of others and the overall impact on society.

2.3. Moral stance

The moral stance is one of the mechanisms by which utilitarianism influences moral behavior. Moral stance refers to an individual's perception and attitude towards moral issues, which determines their evaluation and judgment of certain actions and events. From an ethical standpoint, factors such as the moral nature of behavior, moral principles, and moral values are usually considered and used as guidelines for action. Moral positions may vary depending on factors such as cultural, religious, and social backgrounds, but they all involve the evaluation and judgment of human behavior and relationships. In some cases, ethical positions can be challenged, but having the right ethical stance is always an important factor in guiding individuals to make the right decisions. These are our values and ethics. In utilitarianism, a person's moral stance may prioritize their own happiness and well-being and that of others. In an individual's ethical behavior, taking an ethical stance helps us determine whether our actions are consistent with principles that we believe are right and important. In the field of moral stance, utilitarianism provides a criterion for the choice of moral behavior, that is, "happiness maximization" [1-3]. This is the utilitarian moral stance, which can effectively guide an individual's moral choices. Utilitarianism focuses on the consequences of actions, believing that proper moral behavior should lead to maximum happiness. This principle influences individuals' decision-making processes when faced with moral choices, potentially leading them to choose behaviors that produce greater value. Utilitarianism uses "utility" as the criterion for determining behavioral decisions, while the moral stance is the mechanism by which utilitarianism influences moral behavior [1-3]. Utilitarianism advocates judging the morality of actions solely on the basis of their effects or benefits, and adheres to the ethical principle that effects determine motives. Moral stance refers to an individual's orientation toward moral behavior or attitude in a moral context. Utilitarianism holds that people should pursue maximum happiness or utility, and that this happiness or utility should be universal, just, and uninfluenced by personal preferences or values [1-3]. At the same time, the moral stance emphasizes that individuals should adhere to certain moral principles or values, such as fairness, honesty, and respect for others, in pursuit of maximum happiness or utility. Utilitarianism holds that people should strive to maximize happiness or utility, and that this happiness or utility should be judged and chosen based on real-life circumstances [2]. On the other hand, the moral position emphasizes that in the pursuit of maximum happiness or utility, individuals should make choices consistent with their own values and principles based on their own moral cognition and emotions. Thus, the moral stance is the mechanism by which utilitarianism influences moral behavior. It influences an individual's moral behavior through their cognitive and emotional processes in a moral context to make choices that are consistent with certain moral principles or values.

2.4. Principle of universalization

The principle of universalization is one of the mechanisms by which utilitarianism influences moral behavior. The principle of generalization refers to the adaptability, validity and reliability of a theory, concept, rule, etc. When applied to a new situation. In other words, it means that a theory or concept can maintain its universality when applied to different situations [12]. In science and philosophy, the principle of universalization is an important concept with important implications for understanding the development and application of scientific theories and the universality of the human mind. Utilitarianism asserts the principle that the purpose of action should be to bring maximum happiness, while the principle of universalization emphasizes universality. That is, the applicability and reliability of a theory or concept in different situations will not be reduced by changes in context. In moral behavior, moral principles emphasize the moral obligations and responsibilities of the individual, while utilitarianism promotes the principle of maximum happiness. The principle of universalization holds that the interests of all individuals should be given equal importance and protection, and that everyone should enjoy equal rights and opportunities [13]. In practice, however, the application of this principle can sometimes lead some to take overly radical measures to maintain universalization, leading to conflicts and contradictions. For example, in the case of public resource allocation, utilitarians may advocate the principle of profit maximization to allocate resources, which means making more resources available to more people. But if this method of distribution results in the denial of some people's rights and opportunities, then the principle of universalization requires us to revisit this method of distribution to ensure that everyone's interests and protections are equal [13]. Thus, the principle of universalization can prompt utilitarians to focus on the interests and rights of each individual [12,13]. However, if this principle is overemphasized, it may lead some individuals to take overly radical measures to defend it, leading to conflicts and contradictions. In practice, we should strive to balance moral principles and personal values, while adhering to utilitarian principles to ensure that everyone's interests and protections are equally valued and protected [12, 13].

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that emphasizes the consequences of actions and states that only actions that bring the greatest happiness are morally justified [1-3]. From this perspective, a person's moral behavior is seen as a means of obtaining the greatest benefit for the group as a whole. Thus, this ethical theory can serve as a guide for action, where the moral behavior of an individual is based on the principle of "maximizing happiness." Under the guidance of utilitarianism, the moral behavior of the individual will be regulated and guided. If an action can bring happiness to others or more people (maximizing happiness), such an action is considered "right" from a utilitarian point of view; Conversely, if an action hurts another person or more people, such behavior is considered "wrong." When a person makes moral decisions, he/she should consider not only his/her own interests, but also the interests and well-being of the collective, including others and society [1-3]. Thus, utilitarianism provides the basis for evaluating and determining the moral behavior of individuals. By measuring the maximization of happiness resulting from a certain behavior, individuals can make rational predictions and assessments when deciding whether to adopt certain behaviors. At the same time, the principle of maximizing happiness can also guide individuals to consider the interests of others or the collective in decision-making [1-3]. This can lead to some difficulties and challenges in the decision-making process, but it can also help individuals make the best ethical choices in complex situations. The utilitarian mechanisms mentioned in this article that influence the moral behavior of individuals include empathy, responsibility, moral stance, and universal principles. When these four mechanisms are implemented in specific situations, individuals are better able to practice utilitarian principles and make decisions about ethical behavior.

In general, these four mechanisms contribute to understanding and practicing utilitarian and individual moral behavior to some extent. They assist us in considering the impact and consequences of our actions in a more comprehensive and profound manner when making decisions. Empathy, sense of responsibility, moral standpoint, and universalization principle are important psychological and moral factors that influence individual moral behavior. However, they cannot be fully integrated

into the framework of utilitarianism. In the evaluation criteria of utilitarianism, only the impact of actions on the happiness of all individuals is considered, without directly involving the aforementioned personal moral sentiments or moral standpoint. However, they can be combined with utilitarianism to jointly influence an individual's moral behavior. For example, empathy can prompt individuals to focus on the happiness of others, thereby tending to choose actions that improve their well-being. This is consistent with the evaluation criteria of utilitarianism. A sense of responsibility may make individuals more willing to bear the losses incurred by choosing behaviors that benefit society but harm themselves. Moral standpoint, particularly regarding fairness and justice, may conflict with utilitarianism. Balancing these different viewpoints will make moral decision-making more challenging. The universalization principle can help individuals determine whether a moral decision possesses universality, stability, and adaptability, thereby generating more comprehensive, reliable, and flexible decisions. Although empathy, sense of responsibility, moral standpoint, and delayed gratification are not integral components of utilitarianism, they can influence how individuals understand and practice the decision-making principles of utilitarianism and impact their moral behavior.

These four mechanisms play a very important bridging role in the relationship between utilitarianism and individual moral behavior, helping individuals to better understand and practice utilitarianism and make moral behavior choices that take into account the overall good in their daily lives. However, due to the complexity of individual moral behavior and moral decision-making, "enhancement" here does not mean "improvement" of moral behavior, but a richer and more complex process of thinking and selection. In the decision-making process of personal moral behavior, utilitarian principles require that all potential benefits be considered and that the way to achieve happiness or benefit maximization be chosen, that is, individuals need to evaluate the different consequences that different actions may bring, and need to choose to maximize happiness [1-3]. However, this does not mean that individuals are free to sacrifice others to maximize happiness. In modern utilitarianism, the interests of the individual are protected, so the interests of others cannot be sacrificed at will, and this can only be done if the interests of the minority are agreed and sacrificed within the scope of minimizing harm. This requires fair and just treatment of others, and everyone's interests should be respected and protected. In some ways, this may upend the self-centered view of traditional moral behavior, prompting individuals to view and judge their actions from a broader perspective. In general, the influence of utilitarianism on individual moral behavior is mainly manifested in values, behavior choices and behavior standards, providing a rational, goal-oriented, utility-based moral decision-making model. Therefore, the relationship between utilitarianism and individual moral behavior lies in the fact that utilitarianism provides guidance and direction for individual moral decision-making, and individual moral behavior is also an important way to implement utilitarian principles.

3. Conclusion

This study explores the influence of four mechanisms - empathy, sense of responsibility, moral stance, and universal principles - on utilitarianism and moral behavior, and draws some important conclusions. Firstly, the mechanism of empathy can stimulate individuals to understand and care about others' situations, prompting them to take beneficial actions consistent with the utilitarian goal of promoting others' happiness. Secondly, the sense of responsibility makes individuals aware of the impact of their actions on others and society, thus motivating them to fulfill moral obligations consistent with the utilitarian pursuit of maximizing overall welfare. Thirdly, moral stance significantly affects individuals' choices and behavior in moral decision-making, and utilitarian principles may be consistent or inconsistent with individuals' moral stance. Finally, the principle of universality encourages individuals to put themselves in others' shoes and consider the consequences if everyone adopts the same behavior, consistent with utilitarian considerations of maximizing overall welfare. Through in-depth research on the relationship between these mechanisms and utilitarianism,

we can discover their important role in shaping moral behavior and provide beneficial guidance for the moral development of individuals and society. Further research on the relationship between these mechanisms and utilitarianism contributes to a deeper understanding of utilitarian ethics and provides substantial insight into promoting the goodness and justice of individuals and society.

References

- [1] Rachels, J. *The elements of moral philosophy* (8th ed.). McGraw-Hill. 2019.
- [2] Li, Q. *Utilitarianism of Bian Qin's Thoughts and Its Modern Value*. 2019.6.10
- [3] Pinker, S. *The moral instinct*. In J. Brockman (Ed.), *What Is Your Dangerous Idea?* (pp. 281-285). Harper Perennial. 2008.
- [4] Wu, L. "Repaying Resentment with Virtue" or "Repaying Resentment with Rectitude": On the Emotional Factors in Moral Behavior. *Philosophical Research*, 2022, (12), 73-80.
- [5] Milgram, & Stanley. Behavioral study of obedience. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 1963, 67 (4), 371.
- [6] Chen, W., & Liu, L. The influence of situation on empathy. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 2016, 24 (1), 91.
- [7] Ainslie, G., & Monterosso, J. Hyperbolic discounting lets empathy be a motivated process. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 2002, 25 (1), 20-21.
- [8] Batson, C. D., et al. Is empathy-induced helping due to self-other merger? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1995, 68 (3), 498-510.
- [9] Woodward, V. *Stanford prison experiment*. American Cancer Society, 2017.
- [10] Kiener, M. (Ed.). (2023). *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Responsibility*. Taylor and Francis.
- [11] Renouard, C. Corporate social responsibility, utilitarianism, and the capabilities approach. *Journal of business ethics*, 2011, 98 (1), 85-97.
- [12] Singer, P. *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*. *Journal of Yunmeng*, 2018, 39 (01), 47-52+66.
- [13] Kant, I. *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, 1785.