

AGENT-NEUTRAL AND AGENT-RELATIVE

Traditional utilitarianism holds that an act is permissible if and only if it maximizes utility. This theory is agent-neutral, and this means that it cannot accommodate various agent-relative features of commonsense morality, such as agent-centered options and agent-centered constraints.

Although every moral theory gives us the same formal aim (i.e., that of acting morally), different moral theories give us different substantive aims. The agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction is often drawn in terms of these substantive aims. A moral theory is *agent-neutral* if and only if it gives every agent the exact same set of substantive aims; otherwise, it's *agent-relative*. Thus, traditional utilitarianism is an agent-neutral theory; it gives every agent the aim of maximizing utility. Egoism, by contrast, is an agent-relative theory. It holds that an act is permissible if and only if it maximizes the agent's utility. Thus, egoism gives each of us different aims. It gives me the aim of maximizing *my* utility, but you the aim of maximizing *your* utility.

Since traditional utilitarianism is agent-neutral, it can accommodate neither agent-centered options nor agent-centered constraints. An agent-centered option is a moral option either to act so as to make things better overall but worse for oneself (or others) or to act so as to make things better for oneself (or others) but worse overall. On commonsense morality, agents can, for instance, choose either to donate their disposable income to some hunger-relief charity or

to spend that income on themselves. They can spend that income on themselves and for their own benefit even if giving it all away to some hunger-relief charity would maximize utility. On traditional utilitarianism, by contrast, agents never have the option of doing less than they can to promote utility.

On commonsense morality, there are also agent-centered constraints, such as the constraint against murder. What makes this an *agent-centered* constraint is that it prohibits the commission of murder even for the sake of minimizing comparable commissions of murders. On traditional utilitarianism, by contrast, agents are, other things being equal, obligated to minimize murders overall, since doing so will maximize utility.

Although traditional utilitarianism is an agent-neutral theory, some non-traditional versions of utilitarianism are agent-relative. Expectabilist utilitarianism is, for instance, agent-relative (Ridge 2008). On expectabilist utilitarianism, an act is permissible if and only if it maximizes what, *for the agent*, has the highest expected utility. Although agent-relative, expectabilist utilitarianism is unable to accommodate either agent-centered options or agent-centered constraints. There are, however, other non-traditional versions of utilitarianism that can.

Egoistically-adjusted self-other utilitarianism can accommodate agent-centered options (Vessel). The egoistically-adjusted utility of an act is calculated by summing up everyone's utility after multiplying the agent's utility by two. And, on this view, an act is permissible if and only if there is no alternative that

would produce both more utility for others and more egoistically-adjusted utility. So if I have the choice of performing either x or y , where x would produce five utiles for me and ten utiles for others and where y would produce ten utiles for me and five utiles for others, I'll have the agent-centered option of either doing what's best for others (viz., x) or doing what's best for me (viz., y).

Rule utilitarianism is an agent-relative theory. It gives me the aim of ensuring that my acts conform to the ideal code of rules (i.e., the one with the greatest associated utility) and you the aim of ensuring that your acts accord with the ideal code of rules. Since the ideal code includes rules that prohibit committing certain types of acts even for the sake of minimizing comparable commissions of that act-type, rule utilitarianism accommodates agent-centered constraints. And since the ideal code includes a rule directing us to promote the utility of others when we can do so with a modest cost to ourselves, these costs being summed aggregatively across our entire lives (Hooker 2000), rule utilitarianism accommodates agent-centered options. We will, for instance, have the option of promoting either our own utility or the utility of others on a particular occasion so long as this is consistent with our making at least modest sacrifices for sake of others over the course of our lives.

Bibliography

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Douglas W. Portmore

Arizona State University

Related articles: Expectabilist utilitarianism; Maximization; Rule utilitarianism; Total utilitarianism.

[Word Count: 765]