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ITETHIC

Book: Contemporary Moral Problems

Title: Chapter 1: Ethical Theories (James Rachels: The Debate over Utilitarianism)

Internet Reference:

<http://www.amazon.com/Contemporary-Moral-Problems-James-White/dp/0534517242>

Learning Expectations:

I am expecting to learn more about the principle of Utilitarianism

To know what is the subject of debate on the principle of utilitarianism

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Quote:

*“The strength of Utilitarianism is that it firmly resists ‘corruption’ by possibly irrational elements. By sticking to the Principle of Utility as the only standard for judging right and wrong, it avoids all danger of incorporating into moral theory prejudices, feelings, and ‘intuitions’ that have no rational basis.”*

Book Review:

From the previous part of this book, John Stuart Mill wrote on the Principle of Utility that states: “That happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being desirable as means to that end.” In this part, James Rachels, suggests that this theory should be abandoned. I agree with Rachels’s suggestion. I believe that a lot of factors are needed to be considered like justice, rights, and promises to pass moral judgments.

What I have learned:

I have learned that the Principle of Utility is not purely good. I learned that Hedonism is an optimistic view of morality.

Integrity Questions:

1. What did the Principle of Utility lacked?
2. Is there some way to revise it to make it more substantial?

## Review Questions:

1. Rachels says that classical utilitarianism can be summed up in three propositions. What are they?

- James Rachels summarized the theory of Classical Utilitarianism in three propositions, namely,

1. "Actions are to be judged right or wrong solely in virtue of their consequences. Nothing else matters. Right actions are, simply, those that have the best consequences.
2. "In assessing consequences, the only thing that matters is the amount of happiness or unhappiness that is caused. Everything else is irrelevant. Thus, right actions are those that produce the greatest balance of happiness or unhappiness."
3. "In calculating the happiness or unhappiness that will be caused, no one's happiness is to be counted as more important than anyone else's. Each person's welfare is equally important. As Mill put it in his *Utilitarianism*."

2. Explain the problem with hedonism. How do defenders of utilitarianism respond to this problem?

- Hedonism's problem, as explained by Rachels is that, "Hedonism misunderstands the nature of happiness. Happiness is not something that is recognized as good and sought for its own sake, with other things appreciated only as means of bringing it about."

3. What are the objections about justice, rights, and promises?

- The objections according to James Rachels are as follows:

- **Justice** – "Utilitarianism is incompatible with the ideal of justice. Justice requires us to treat people fairly, according to their individual needs and merits."
- **Rights** – "The notion of personal right is not a utilitarian notion. Quite the reverse: it is a notion that places limits on how an individual may be treated, regardless of the good purposes that might be accomplished."
- **Promises** – "The only kinds of considerations that the Utilitarian theory holds relevant to determining the rightness of actions are considerations having to do with the *future*...The general point to be made about Utilitarianism is that it seems to be an adequate moral theory because it excludes what we might call backward-looking considerations."

4. Distinguish between rule- and act-utilitarianism. How does rule-utilitarianism reply to the objections?

- Rule-utilitarianism, as defined by Rachels is, "Individual actions will no longer be judged by the Principle of Utility, instead, *rules* will be established by reference to the principle, and individual acts will then be judged right or wrong by reference to the rules." Act-utilitarianism just refers to the original theory.

5. What is the third line of defense?

- The third line of defense as explained by James Rachels as referenced to J. J. C. Smart's 1961 monograph is, "Our moral common sense is, after all, not necessarily reliable. It may incorporate various irrational elements, including prejudices absorbed from our parents, our religion, and the general culture."

Discussion Questions:

1. Smart's defense of utilitarianism is to reject common moral beliefs when they conflict with utilitarianism. Is this acceptable to you or not? Explain your answer.

- No, because after reading Rachel's debate over utilitarianism, I have come into thinking that utilitarianism still is not plausible, whatever defense they said.

2. A utilitarian is supposed to give moral consideration to all concerned. Who must be considered? What about nonhuman animals? How about lakes and streams?

- Generally, all must be considered even animals and the environment. This is because men were chosen to be the steward of the earth. And only we humans have the capability to do so.

3. Rachels claims that merit should be given moral consideration independent of utility. Do you agree?

- Yes, because favors gained from merits are returned. At least in my experience.