The Utilitarian Calculus

It forms around culture and often sweeps through government minds. It has a seemingly happy front but can cause unnecessary harm to the truly innocent. To an extent, Utilitarian theory has a potential and a call for greater happiness, but when put to its ultimate test it fails. One ought to do the greatest good for the greatest number. It’s true; Utilitarianism promotes prosperity, has a calculus to make decisions, and it promotes the general good and is upheld by all the traits of morality. However, it can also be overwhelmingly unjust. How is it that one knows for certain the ultimate good? After this question, there is also a question of Act Utilitarianism or Rule Utilitarianism. Which is best or which can bring about the most happiness? Also in question is how does it relate to LDS ethics and how it is used in society?

This is what I believe Utilitarianism stands for.

The main point for Utilitarianism is that one ought to make decisions on what is the greatest good for the greatest number of people being considered. In this, no moral obligations of justice or mercy are included. It strictly promotes benefits, advantages, pleasure, good, and happiness for the masses and attempts to avoid mischief, pain, evil, and unhappiness. In theory, this seems like a perfect plan.

To be certain, if only the masses are considered then it assuredly promotes prosperity. If we lived in a society that functioned this way, we would always be concerned with those coming
after us, as they are to soon be the masses as well. It is better for the masses and our prosperity if we keep our planet clean and our people healthy. This would be a general Utilitarian calculus.

The Utilitarian calculus is another benefit to this theory. There isn’t a long drawn out calculation for each decision-based action. There is a measurable way to decide what to do. All you need to remember is: Do what promotes the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In some situations this is a good answer to problems. For example, as Nephi approaches Laban (helplessly passed out, drunk, and lying on the ground) the Spirit said to him that he must kill Laban for it’s better than one man die than a nation dwindle and perish in unbelief. It makes sense and would be for the greatest benefit for all.

Utilitarianism encourages the general good as well. It helps society to function as a whole and in unity. It can be universalized, prescriptive, practical, able to override all other elements, and can be publicized. According to moral traits, this theory is an infallible one.

Here is one application of Utilitarianism—Taxes. If we tax the minority rich in our nation and then pass on that money to the majority, the greatest number, who isn’t rich we would better equal the wealth of our country. Those who didn’t have money would be able to be pulled out of financial debt and worry. It would be the greatest good for the greatest number.

Although with these upstanding qualities there are also tremendous weaknesses. Even while Utilitarianism promotes prosperity and the general good it is also extremely unjust. At any moment, with almost no warning, any person may be dealt with unjustly. If the government, or those in charge, determines that it would be best for the greatest number that this innocent person be put to death for any given reason then it will be done without thought. If we were to live strictly by this principle, there would be a certain degree of chaos. The conclusion of the story of
the Baker and Blacksmith by Johann Herman Wessel, read, “The moral of the story: Be always prepared to die! It comes when you least expect it”(250). In accordance with Utilitarianism, he is saying that you must be always prepared to die for in any case you may become a sacrifice for the greatest good.

Another problem with this theory lies with the calculus. How exactly does one know what the greatest good for the greatest number? In my example of Nephi and Laban earlier, it is God, through the Spirit, that makes this calculus. Because God knows all, it isn’t terribly hard to make this calculation because He knows the future, which we do not. There is no way that I know of, except by divine revelation, which anyone could know what the greatest good would be for the future.

Back to our modern application of Utilitarianism—Taxes. Although taxing the rich would help the poor, those that are well off have most often worked hard for their wealth and have earned it. Just as well, some of those who are poor have done nothing to improve their own situation and they get paid for it. Also, because we cannot see into the future we would not know for certain how this would play out. People might stop working as hard because they might decide that if they were poor they wouldn’t have to pay taxes and would get paid for doing close to nothing. Initially, this plan of taxing the rich sounds like it would benefit the greatest number in society but ultimately this may lead to a decline in our advances and increase a lack of motivation.

Along with these problems there is the question of Act Utilitarianism or Rule Utilitarianism. Act Utilitarianism is the theory that every decision made must be determined by your own calculation without thought to objective rules. This often proves difficult because
every situation must be weighed and thought out. Although it does give room for adaptations, Rule Utilitarianism is the belief that one has certain rules that direct him through all his Utilitarian decisions. This however does not provide room for flexibility, but it does provide some structure to the theory. Another question that comes up with Rule Utilitarianism is—where exactly do we get the objective rules or truth?

Unlike Utilitarianism, LDS theology does have objective truths that are divinely inspired. LDS theology does indeed have rules, but they are not strict capricious rules like in rule Utilitarianism. In contrast to LDS theology, Utilitarianism is concerned with the majority, as Christ is concerned with everyone. There isn’t a soul that he is not concerned with. Christ died for every person, not just the majority. Utilitarianism also is not preoccupied with justice, mercy, charity, faith, and hope. These virtues are, however, play major roles in LDS theology. LDS theology includes virtue theory and places importance on those beliefs, which Utilitarianism does not. LDS theology also places a significant value on revelation. If Utilitarianism did place importance on revelation I believe it would be much better, but it doesn’t.

In short comparison, LDS theology does believe in sacrifice, as does Utilitarianism. But instead of willing sacrifice in LDS theology, Utilitarianism promotes sacrifice for the minority to benefit the majority, but often it is unwilling sacrifice. Another comparison is that both of these theologies are concerned with others and the benefit of others in society.

In some respects this theory could prove of significant value when it works alongside with LDS ethics. Fist of all, the basis of LDS ethics consists of: revelation, virtue ethics, and divine command theory. If we added divine revelation to know what the greatest good for the
greatest number would be, that would alleviate the issue of being uncertain about the outcome of a decision. Once we had revelation into the future, as do the prophets and seers of our church, we could be able to make those ultimate decisions to what is best. Also, if we added some of the LDS virtues, from the virtue ethics, to our calculations we could better justly make our decisions and we would not have the chaos due to unjust and unmerciful calculations.

I would conclude that Utilitarianism has good intentions but I do believe that in some applications we cannot know the greatest good for the future. The harm it could cause to innocent people also disturbs me greatly, even if it would bring about greater happiness for the majority. However, if combined with LDS ethics I do believe it could be a more full and complete theory. The combination would promote a much better general well-being and a greater degree of happiness.