DAVID LYONS ON UTILITARIAN GENERALIZATION

In *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism*, David Lyons argues that utilitarian generalization does not succeed in circumventing the classical objections confronting act utilitarianism.\(^1\) When properly understood, he claims, utilitarian generalization is extensionally equivalent to act utilitarianism: the two theories yield identical prescriptions when applied to the same cases. This claim, if correct, undermines much of utilitarian generalization's appeal, for anyone who rejects act utilitarianism on the ground that it yields counterintuitive prescriptions will find little merit in a theory which yields the very same prescriptions.\(^2\)

In this paper, I shall argue that Lyons' claim is incorrect: utilitarian generalization, as he interprets it, is not extensionally equivalent to act utilitarianism. This conclusion gives proponents of generalization little cause for celebration, since Lyons' version of utilitarian generalization yields, if anything, even less plausible prescriptions than act utilitarianism. However, once the nature of Lyons' version of the theory is clearly recognized, it is easy to avoid this difficulty by formulating a closely related version. Unfortunately the resulting theory is also unsatisfactory, for it proves incapable of yielding any prescriptions at all when applied to a wide range of morally significant cases. Thus neither of these versions of utilitarian generalization is an acceptable moral theory. However, since Lyons is wrong in thinking that his version of utilitarian generalization is the only correct one, the door remains open for some possibly more successful version of the theory to be proposed.

1. Lyons' version of utilitarian generalization

The most plausible form of utilitarian generalization may be formulated in the following manner:

\[(UG) \text{ An action is right if and only if the consequences of everyone's} \]

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performing that sort of action would be at least as good as the consequences of everyone's performing any alternative sort of action.⁸

The analogous form of act utilitarianism may be stated similarly:

(AU) An action is right if and only if the consequences of that action would be at least as good as the consequences of any alternative action.

It is clear that no prescriptions may be derived from UG until some interpretation is given to two of its central terms, namely 'everyone' and 'that sort of action'.⁴ Both terms are ambiguous: 'everyone' could be taken as referring to every moral agent, or everyone involved in a certain practice, or everyone who has the opportunity to perform the act in question, while 'that sort of action' might mean, for example, 'voting', or 'voting for Candidate A', or 'voting for Candidate A while the majority votes for Candidate B'. Since the consequences of 'everyone's performing that sort of action' depend on which of these alternatives is chosen, the interpretation of these terms determines the prescriptions generated by UG.

Lyons suggests that we collapse the two problems into one. According to his proposal, the term 'everyone' should be interpreted to mean "that class of persons, each of whom will have occasion to do the sort of thing specified, to each of whom such a course of action is or will be a practical possibility." (p. 31) Then, if aspects of the agent's identity turn out to be significant, we may simply include them in an expanded description of the action. The important issue thus becomes the problem of determining which description of an action is the relevant one – which description must hold true of other actions if they are to qualify as 'that sort of action'. According to Lyons, this issue cannot be resolved simply by determining what features of an action are, generally speaking, morally relevant. What we need is an account of those features of an action which are morally relevant to a particular moral theory, namely UG. We need a 'criterion of relevance' that enables us to pick out which properties of an action must be included in its description for purposes of applying UG. This criterion, moreover, must be implied by the theory itself. (p. 34)

Lyons states that the criterion of relevance appropriate to UG is one