Calculating Consequences:
The Utilitarian Approach to Ethics

When Oliver North was asked to explain why he lied to congressional committees about his role in the Iran-Contra affair, he replied, "Lying does not come easily to me. But we all had to weigh in the balance the difference between lies and lives." Elsewhere in his testimony, North was asked about the false chronology of events he fabricated when preparing a summary of the government's involvement in arms sales to Iran:

Questioner:...You have indicated that...in your own mind...it was a good idea to put forth this false version...[But] there were reasons on the other side, were there not?

North:...Reasons on the other side?

Questioner:...First of all, you put some value, don't you, in the truth?

North: I've put great value in the truth. I came here to tell it.

Questioner: So...that would be a reason not to put forward this [false] version of the facts?

North: The truth would be reason not to put forward this [false] version of the facts, but as I indicated to you a moment ago, I put great value on the lives of the American hostages...and I put great value on that second channel [an intermediary used by the U.S. to deal with the Iranians], who was at risk.

Questioner: By putting out this false version of the facts, you were committing, were you not, the entire Administration to telling a false story?

North: Well, let, let--I'm not trying to pass the buck here. OK? I did a lot of things, and I want to stand up and say that I'm proud of them.

North's method of justifying his acts of deception is a form of moral reasoning that is called "utilitarianism". Stripped down to its essentials, utilitarianism is a moral principle that holds that the morally right course of action in any situation is the one that produces the greatest balance of benefits over harms for everyone affected. So long as a course of action produces maximum benefits for everyone, utilitarianism does not care whether the benefits are produced by lies, manipulation, or coercion.

Many of us use this type of moral reasoning frequently in our daily decisions. When asked to explain why we feel we have amoral duty to perform some action, we often point to the good that will come from the action or the harm it will prevent. Business analysts, legislators, and

scientists weigh daily the resulting benefits and harms of policies when deciding, for example, whether to invest resources in a certain public project, whether to approve a new drug, or whether to ban a certain pesticide.

Utilitarianism offers a relatively straightforward method for deciding the morally right course of action for any particular situation we may find ourselves in. To discover what we ought to do in any situation, we first identify the various courses of action that we could perform. Second, we determine all of the foreseeable benefits and harms that would result from each course of action for everyone affected by the action. And third, we choose the course of action that provides the greatest benefits after the costs have been taken into account.

The principle of utilitarianism can be traced to the writings of Jeremy Bentham, who lived in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bentham, a legal reformer, sought an objective basis that would provide a publicly acceptable norm for determining what kinds of laws England should enact. He believed that the most promising way of reaching such an agreement was to choose that policy that would bring about the greatest net benefits to society once the harms had been taken into account. His motto, a familiar one now, was "the greatest good for the greatest number".

Over the years, the principle of utilitarianism has been expanded and refined so that today there are many variations of the principle. For example, Bentham defined benefits and harms in terms of pleasure and pain. Today utilitarians often describe benefits and harms in terms of the satisfaction of persona preferences or in purely economic terms.

Utilitarians also differ in their views about the kind of question we ought to ask ourselves when making an ethical decision. Some utilitarians maintain that in making an ethical decision, we must ask ourselves: "What effect will my doing this act in this situation have on the general balance of good over evil?" If lying would produce the best consequences in a particular situation, we ought to lie. Others claim that we must choose that act that conforms to the general rule that would have the best consequences. In other words, we must ask ourselves: "What effect would everyone's doing this kind of action have on the general balance of good over evil?" So, for example, the rule "to always tell the truth" in general promotes the good of everyone and therefore should always be followed, even if in a certain situation lying would produce the best consequences. Despite such differences among utilitarians, however, most hold to the general principle that morality must depend on balancing the beneficial and harmful consequences of our conduct.

While utilitarianism is currently a very popular ethical theory, there are some difficulties in relying on it as a sole method for moral decision-making. First, the utilitarian calculation requires that we assign values to the benefits and harms resulting from our actions and compare them with the benefits and harms that might result from other actions. But it's often difficult, if not impossible, to measure and compare the values of certain benefits and costs. How do we go about assigning a value to life or to art? And how do we go about comparing the value of money with, for example, the value of life, the value of time, or the value of human dignity? Moreover, can we ever be really certain about all of the consequences of our actions? Our ability to measure and to predict the benefits and harms resulting from a course of action or a moral rule is dubious, to say the least.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with utilitarianism is that it fails to take into account considerations of justice. We can imagine instances where a certain course of action would produce great benefits for society, but they would be clearly unjust. South African whites, for example, sometimes claim that all South Africans--including blacks--are better off under white rule. They have claimed that in those African nations that have traded a whites-only government for a black or mixed one, social conditions have rapidly deteriorated. Civil wars, economic decline, famine, and unrest, they predict, will be the result of allowing the black majority of South Africa to run the government. If such a prediction is true, then the white government of South Africa would be morally justified by utilitarianism, in spite of its injustice.

If our moral decisions are to take into account considerations of justice, then apparently utilitarianism cannot be the sole principle guiding our decisions. It can, however, play a role in these decisions. The principle of utilitarianism invites us to consider the immediate and the less immediate consequences of our actions. It also asks us to look beyond self-interest to consider impartially the interests of all persons affected by our actions. As John Stuart Mill, a famous utilitarian, once wrote:

The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not...(one's) own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.

In an era that some have characterized as "the age of self-interest", utilitarianism is a powerful reminder that morality calls us to look beyond the self to the good of all.