Evaluation Of The Rule Utilitarian Method Regarding Its Application To Charity

As with Kantian ethics, let us evaluate the Rule Utilitarian method regarding its application to charity, and whether it can aid an evaluation of “Good Charity” and use its strengths to formulate a renewed ethics of charity.

The Past it seems is always irrelevant to the Rule Utilitarian theory, as only present and future happiness matter. As such, if the future of mankind is improved through acts of charity then it should be maximised. If innocent individuals are negatively targeted to maximise happiness however, these acts are still deemed moral according to this theory if the consequential happiness is maximised. This is problematic for “Good Charity”, as John Rawls argues, because Utilitarianism is too impersonal and does not consider the rights of the minority in “an attempt to seek the greater good” (Rawls 1971 P.189). There seems to be a severe problem of integrity within both rule and act utilitarianism, as Reinhold Neibuhr states, a powerful mans’ donation is simply “a display of his power and an expression of his pity” (Niebuhr 1932), and the reasoning behind the act of kindness tarnishes its moral worth. Yet Utilitarianism is not an all selfish philosophy. In defence of this claim, Mill states that utilitarianism is concerned “not with the agents own happiness, but with the greatest happiness altogether”(Mill, 1975, I.3). However, if the use of necessary evils that Utilitarian’s adhere to targets a minority negatively, then the theory fails to meet the standards of “Good Charity”. The act and outcome must be equally evaluated with regard to the most loving thing within a strong ethical theory, which utilitarianism fails to do. But how does this effect the autonomy of the recipients?

Utilitarian’s are encouraged to act according to their desires, so for Kant their autonomy is already faulted. However, desires are subjective. If the desires of a Utilitarian negatively impact the minority, then it may be the case that the recipient’s autonomy has not been interfered with as such, but the autonomy of those whom have been used to maximise the best outcome for the charity have been. Even those in genuine need should concern themselves with the condition of self-government because by acting in the wrong way to get help they may negatively impact society. This may discourage acts of kindness toward people in genuine need. The rules in Mills theory may prevent criminal acts that interfere with human autonomy, yet evoking rules renders Mill’s theory deontological. Strict rule following is irrational if a necessary evil disobeying the rule will produce more happiness without negatively impacting others. Thus, if utilitarianism is to be an ethically applicable theory to charity, it must ensure that the minority are not negatively affected without being strictly deontological. It is impractical to think about predicted “good” consequences without the analysis of a “good” act.

Lastly, concerning ones-self with self-government is difficult when measuring qualitative over quantitative happiness and higher over lower pleasures. This notion negates that all acts of kindness are never wasted because it places a hierarchy on certain actions without providing a situational analysis per unique scenario. So, although it seems ethical that a single act of kindness for a homeless individual over the funding of a charity that does not aid those in genuine need but provides quantitative pleasure for the community is more ethical, the placement of a hierarchy of pleasures is still as problematic as Bentham’s Felicific calculus. Ultimately Charity should adhere to the notion that no acts of kindness are ever wasted, which

Rule Utilitarianism fails to do. Kindness should not be measured, only recognised. To understand the problem of higher and lower pleasures in context, imagine I have promised to raise money for charity by organising a bake-off. On the day, I am also offered free opera tickets. Prioritising my happiness, and deeming the opera to be a higher pleasure than baking, I decided to attend the opera. On returning home, I make an excuse that I had been too sick to participate in the bake-off (a necessary evil). I have minimised the disappointment of the Charity by lying (another necessary evil), consequentially analysing that they would be more disappointed knowing that I could not be bothered to participate. In theory, I am acting morally if attending the opera is deemed an educational higher pleasure. Yet I am negatively impacting society through my actions as money for those in genuine need has not been raised. This is another reason hindering the application of Rule utilitarianism in totality for ethics of charity as there is the potential to justify any act.

Unlike Act Utilitarianism, however, it seems that there are areas of Mill's method which could be useful to apply to revised ethics of charity as a means of improving the ethical standard of acts and outcomes. Despite the weaknesses that remain in Mills theory, his notion of the 'competent judge' could be useful within revised ethics if the notion also emphasises an impartial spectator, much like the work of Adam Smith in "On the theory of Moral Sentiment" (1759 Part III, 1.2), Unlike the competent judge which relies on another individual to make decisions for us on a non-bias level, the practise of the impartial spectator ourselves allows for an individual analysis of ethics and morality. We can use this area of the theory to enhance the focus on natural human emotions of empathy and sympathy which in turn should enhance "Good Charity" as a whole.