Can it ever be morally acceptable to sacrifice an innocent person for some greater good? Illustrate your answer with examples.

Sacrificial dilemmas, like the proposed question, are often characterized for pitting utilitarian and deontologist[1] ethics against one another. I will be discussing why someone may favour a utilitarian standpoint – it is acceptable to sacrifice one for a some greater good - but also evaluate the sinister effects of perpetuating this thinking. For the purposes of my essay, I will interpret 'sacrifice' as 'to injure, or murder especially for an ideal, belief, or end.'

Firstly, I will dissect why someone may believe it is morally permissible to sacrifice an innocent for a subsequent greater good. Imagine a scenario where a train trolley is racing down a track toward five people tied to the rail. There is a switch that would divert the trolley onto another track where only one person is tied to the rail. Do you choose to pull the switch to kill one person but save five? (Philippa Foot, 1967). A person's decision to pull the lever and sacrifice one innocent person to benefit more people is aggregated in a quantitative fashion. The happiness of the individuals in a system is measured equally to determine if the harm or demise of one person will thereafter cause greater pleasure for the majority. This style of thinking corresponds with utilitarian modes of decision-making. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory, devised by Jeremy Bentham, that determines the morality of an action based purely off consequences. Utilitarianism expresses that a moral action is good or right if it maximises happiness and minimises pain for the greatest number (Hayward, 2017). Therefore, a utilitarian would claim that it is acceptable to sacrifice an innocent person if as a direct result happiness would be maximized for the greatest number.

[1] A person who supports Deontology – An ethical theory that uses moral rules to distinguish between right and wrong

While the 'Trolley Problem' (mentioned above) provokes valuable questions about moral thought, sacrificial dilemmas like these are criticized for being highly theoretical and lack mundane and psychological realism. The probability of these predicaments being encountered in the average person's life is slim to none. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a *globally*

experienced health crisis, entailed many of its own moral dilemmas which additionally can be applied to analyse the sacrificial dilemmas in more depth. The benefits of utilitarian judgments can be contextualized from medical policies made during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Some believe utilitarianism was useful in answering 'the ventilator triage' – how to allocate ventilators which were in a dire short supply. The pandemic caused a pertinent ethical need to consider how to

efficiently minimise the loss of life. As Savulescu claimed in the opening of his paper discussing the dilemma, "there are no egalitarians in the pandemic." The sheer scale of the crisis faced by healthcare meant that not all patients could be provided with comprehensive and equal treatment. To prevent any unnecessary loss of life, decisions had to be made regarding which patients should be prioritized. Moreover, as Savulescu states, a utilitarian would reject the notion

of 'first come, first served' to decide about treatment. Consequentialists believed doctors should be prepared to withdraw treatment from poor prognosis patients to begin the treatment of better prognosis patients even if they arrive later. While all patients understandably want their illness to be treated, with limited resources, it's not always possible to invest equally in all circumstances (Savulescu, 2020). In this instance, a utilitarianism's aim would be to maximise survival rates. This is an example of a real-life sacrificial dilemma – sacrifice/withdraw the treatment of an innocent patient for a greater good. Therefore, in an unprecedented event like COVID where loss of time would result in greater mortality rates, it would seem morally

permissible to sacrifice an innocent for some greater good.

While on the face of it consequential thinking is a feasible and efficient theory, it has an alarmingly darker side. Utilitarianism's opponents, deontologists, condemn utilitarian judgment for it infringes rights and ignores the welfare of individuals. Utilitarianism was established in the negation of natural rights, utilitarian's founder, Jeremy Bentham, attacked Human Rights calling

them "nonsense on stilts." However natural rights[2], e.g. right to life, are inalienable, universal and transcend culture and place, and therefore are indisputably important to preserve a peaceful society and are not so called "nonsense". Natural rights played an important part in medical ethics. It was transparent in the Ventilator Triage that utilitarians defended putting one life above another if it causes a good outcome which breach the 'right to life'. However deontologists emphasise the value of every human and insist that you should never violate natural rights. Deontology is an agent-based theory which focuses on individual wellbeing rather than a collective wellbeing where morality is defined by moral rules such as 'the sanctity of life', and 'the principle of autonomy'. Regarding, the sacrificial dilemma, a deontologist would never knowingly and intentionally sacrifice one person for the good of another as it violates the moral duty to "never treat another rational being merely as a means to an end". For these reasons, Deontology is a more appealing ethical theory as it fits with our moral intuition of what is right and wrong

(Moore, 2021).

How would deontologists tackle the ventilator triage? Many criticise a utilitarian's decision to unequally distribute ventilators because it could result in discrimination against patients with pre-existing conditions, and the elderly as they are less likely to survive treatment. However, Deontologists in healthcare, take into consideration that withdrawing treatment, against the patients will, could amount to unlawful killings and therefore goes against the moral duty to 'not murder' (Swartz, n.d.). Deontology prescribes a treatment plan based on individual rights i.e. the

basic worth of human lives, rather than the distribution of resources to obtain the best outcome. This illustrates that deontologists don't think the denial or removal of treatment is right and therefore, the treatment of one patient should not be sacrificed to aggregate a better outcome. While this is a very humane perspective and a concern for individual human welfare is exhibited, non-utilitarian approaches can create unseen and unaccounted harms. For deontologists, the "right" is more important than the "good", but this provokes an important question: is following

[2] Human Rights which all humans inherently acquire

duty/being right always the best action? While it is understandable to reject the idea of denying a patient treatment, ultimately, in a pandemic situation if you attempt to invest equally to all patients, it may lead to more casualties. If there is another course of action you can take to prevent loss of life, is that the more morally acceptable or better action to take? Nevertheless it is safe to state that deontologists would oppose the notion of sacrificing an innocent person for a greater good.

Another criticism to being pro-sacrifice in these moral dilemmas is the negative implications of instrumental harm on the moral agent (the person responsible for enacting the sacrifice). Instrumental harm is the choice to harm or injure someone for the greater good. Instrumental harm is innately violent and has a sinister psychological side-effect, which in summary increases violent behaviours in a moral agent. In utilitarianism, in order to sacrifice one to advantage many, utilitarians must accept the implication of inflicting harm or death without qualification. This is problematic as this could increase someone's capability of violence in two ways:

1) Instrumental aggression or violence has been studied to cultivate and grow more violence to a point where it seems more acceptable. Hence, by exercising instrumental harm once, you could prime aggression within you and repeat behaviours. Many argue utilitarianism doesn't merely justify instrumental harm but encourages it. Utilitarianism rewards violent behaviours that lead to a greater good but the 'principle of social reinforcement'

states: rewarding aggression leads to aggressing again instead of curbing violence (Tarry, n.d.).

2) Accretive violence can be caused by a 'precedent effect' - once something is done, it becomes easier for others to follow those actions. Philosopher Bernard Williams states that precedents are a probable negative consequence of utilitarianism. For example, theoretically if there was an action which was the best approach in a particular circumstance, but by carrying it out it will stimulate, by precedent, people to do things which would clearly not be the best thing to do (Williams, n.d.). A Precedent that

instrumental harm is a mentally justifiable answer in a dilemma is dangerous and could conceivably lead to a succession of violent actions that are completed in the name of the 'greater good'. This highlights that Utilitarianism does not reflect or consider the social effects of others being influenced by instrumental harm and therefore could entail and grow violence.

Ultimately, does the potential cost of instrumental harm outweigh the benefits of the sacrifice? While some would say the arguments presented above are solely theoretical and have no guarantee that they would be triggered by exercising instrumental harm, I think they are conceivable risks and emphasise the dark dimensions to instrumental harm. Therefore, it is hard to accept a sacrifice for a greater good when it poses a threat to the peaceful temperament of society.

To conclude, there is a plurality of views about what defines morality and moral acceptability when discussing a sacrificial dilemma. Some look to maximise the best outcomes, whereas others look at the characteristics of the action itself rather the product. In a generalized sacrificial dilemma, I believe it is harmful to take a utilitarian stance because it violates human rights to life and autonomy. Having said this, in a historically unique and isolated event like COVID-19, which provided unprecedented medical and moral challenges, there is more of an

acceptability

surrounding utilitarianism due to the time sensitive and unknown nature of the virus. I believe it would be unfair to criticize health professionals for exercising utilitarian judgments during the pandemic. It was an indispensable response to the overwhelming severity of the crisis where speed was required, and knowledge was limited. Nonetheless, valuable questions have been raised regarding how to tackle future health crises. Perhaps a future discussion should be held discussing a compromise of action between the austere but efficient methods of utilitarianism and the humane but costly deontology.

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