# SOME LIMITS OF UTILITARIAN GENERALIZATION

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## Abstract

*Utilitarian Generalization (UG) is considered as one of the forms of utilitarianism according to which an assumption of hypothetical generalization is drawn in such a way that what would happen if everyone did the same action. It is a shifting process of utilitarian thinking from a particular action to the generalization of everyone concerned with the act. That"s why UG is also called extensionally equivalent to act-utilitarianism. Each form of utilitarianism is emerged on the basis of limiting other forms of utilitarianism. The purpose of the paper is to explore the limits of utilitarian generalization. The limits are identified on the whole by analyzing the terms used in understanding UG, relating to pervasiveness of generalization, justice and utility.*

## Introduction

According to utilitarianism the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by its consequences – in consequence if the action tends to maximize the net overbalancing sum total of pleasure over pain for all parties concerned then the action is good. One of the significant forms of utilitarianism is act-utilitarianism according to which one should always perform that action which will maximize utility, which will produce the greatest overall utility. Utilitarian Generalization is the view that one should act in such a way that could produce the greatest utility if they were generalized (e.g., acted upon by everyone). It is a form of utilitarianism, which emerges to overcome the limits of act-utilitarianism. Sometimes an act- utilitarianism is criticized just because everyone"s acting similarly would be bad. What would happen if everyone did the same? Is often used to raise such criticism. This kind of hypothetical question is a generalization test and is called utilitarian generalization (UG) (Lyons, 1965). In other words, utilitarian generalization is one of the several varieties of indirect act evaluation. In this view, the rightness or wrongness of a particular (token) act derives indirectly from its consequences by way of the general practice of that kind of act.

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"Utilitarian generalization begins with the particular action, generalizes to the abstract "what if everyone acted similarly in similar situations?", and then returns to evaluate the particular action through an examination of the generalization." (Holbrook, 1988, p. 32). UG can be meant in a pervasive way emphasizing the comparability of different situations as Regan (1980, p. 94) maintains "An act is right if and only if the consequences of its being performed by the agent and all other agents similarly situated." Our objective in this paper not to explain the understanding or meaning of UG, rather our objective is to explore some limits of UG which are as follows:

**Ambiguity in Terminology**

The very common slogan of UG is that what would happen if everyone did the same kind of action or same sort of action. There are two important terms in UG such as "everyone" and "that sort of action" which are ambiguous in its meaning. Goldman (1974) raises the questions about their multiple meanings that might be meant in understanding UG. According to him, the term "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. The term everyone is complex, it can be a collective use in which it is replaceable by something like "everyone together" or "everyone at once", and a distributive use in which it is replaceable by any one." (Griffith, 1963 cited in Sobel, 1970). On the other hand, „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 for candidate B". Goldman adds, "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."

We know that grammatically the terms "everyone" and "that sort of action" are not related to one another. But the terms used in UG formula "everyone" and "that sort of action" cannot be meant separately but they are used conjunctively. In other words, there is a close relationship between these two terms at least in this UG. For the purpose of showing the relationship between "everyone" and "that sort of action" Lyons suggests, "that class of persons, [everyone] 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 practical possibility" (1965, p. 31).

There is one important ambiguity, in the concept of „everyone‟ which can be seen in a statement like theft example. Theft can be divided into two types such as theft in general and theft by a poor man from a rich one who illegally earned wealth. Apparently, it seems to us that theft by a poor man from the rich one is harmless and positively good. On the other hand, theft in general is the useful right of property which will be open to frequent invasion. It can be said that if only this class of theft were generally committed, there would be so many of them (other actions) that we could properly speak of thieving (unqualified) as general.

Stout (1954, p. 11) refers to Austin to clarify the concept „everyone‟ by the above mentioned theft example. According to him, Austin does not actually distinguish theft in terms of species- genus division. Yet it may be said that this distinction is important both in principle and in practice.

Stout gives an example to show the concept „everyone‟ in terms of its distinctive feature. He takes the example of a starving man tempted to steal as the only alternative to dying of hunger. If thefts in these circumstances only were generally committed, they would be so few as not to have the bad effects on the economy and ultimately on general happiness. Moreover, the special nature and urgency of the motive for stealing in such cases is so plainly marked, so clearly comprehensible and so distinct from other motives for stealing, that there is little risk of its weakening the motives that maintain general honesty (Stout, 1954, p.11.).

The terms "everyone" and "that sort of action" are ambiguous. We know that ambiguity in language creates lots of confusion and problem. By using ambiguous terms, UG also faces similar sorts of limitations. By this example given by Stout we can understand that general framework of any action should be clarified. And in this clarification there is a tendency of imposing modification in the generalization framework. Therefore, it becomes a generalization by degeneralization process.

## Rhetorical Idea

Sometimes it is claimed that UG cannot be applied in the concrete situation and as a result it becomes a rhetoric idea. According to C. D. Broad (1916), UG can be a false universalization when it is used in the reasonings of daily life. The false universalization is a false hypothesis in which everybody will be forced to act in a certain way. For this reason, according to C. D. Broad, false universalization forces them to assert "the

rightness or wrongness of many of our actions depends on the probable consequences, not of what we judge to be true, but of what we know to be false." (1916).

By this passage, we can understand that UG is compared here with probable consequence in which it is in fact, not possible to evaluate what is right or wrong. C. D. Broad makes understand us that everybody''s action in UG principle cannot be assumed by a priori principle and this can be observed by empirical way. And by empirical way one cannot predict incoming all future actions. The argument of UG is that what would happen if everyone or large numbers of people did the same sometimes becomes rhetorical. The reason is that if the argument is ever valid, is subject to great limitation and doubt. C. D. Broad further adds that for ensuring the result of any action one need not multiply results hypothetically and even one can easily overlook to bring the notion of other agents performing precisely similar acts. We may give an example to make understand this. If someone walks through a flower garden and pluck a single flower. Then a question may arise whether this action is right, wrong or indifferent. If the situation becomes different that means: we may imagine that a million people walked through the garden and each plucked a flower, the consequences would be very bad. Someone''s walking through may have done no damage whatever, but it would be physically impossible for a million people to walk through without doing grave damage. It is better, therefore, not merely to drop the reference to everybody, but also to drop the reference to agents altogether and to consider nothing but the hypothetical multiplication of results like the result of my action (Broad, 1916. p. 383).

If we want to rescue UG from the deficiency of rhetorical idea, generalization can be looked from two points of view. One is generalization in unlimited sense what we mean it normally. Another is in relevant sense. If we mean generalization in unlimited sense, then it will be in infinite regress and will be mere rhetorical. On the other hand, if it means relevant case, it will not be rhetorical. For this reason, Gruzalski (1982) mentions, "We need some workable notion of what properties are relevant for the description of an act for applications of UG. We will assume that a property is relevant for such applications only if it is a causal property in virtue of which everyone''s doing that kind of act will foreseeable produce utility or disutility."

**Problems in Relevant Factors**

In the just previous section we have mentioned the relevant factor in the application of UG principle to overcome the problem of its rhetorical idea. But the relevant factor can be also another problem in the application of UG. We find two types of problems in relevance factors in applying UG formula. One is contradictory situation and another is an irrelevant causal chain. In the contradictory case, the relevance factor can be explained in two imaginary situations. In one situation everybody acts on the maxim of disregarding the law since its requirements are inconvenient while in another situation obeying the law (e.g., unjust law) by which one‟s execution is clear violation of justice. Socrates accepts second situation and uses the generalization argument „what if everyone did the same?‟ As a result, harmful consequence of Socrates arises although Socrates did not think it as harmful.

If everyone committed a certain act then there might be disastrous consequences. And for this reason one may conclude that to avoid disastrous consequence one has a prima facie moral obligation to avoid that certain act. We will have to maintain for example, that there is a prima facie obligation not eating dinner at five o‟clock, for if everyone did so, certain essential service could not be maintained. And for similar reasons we will have to maintain that there is a prima facie obligation not to produce food. So from this example we see that there arises an irrelevant causal chain from everyone‟s not eating dinner to not producing food. This irrelevant causal chain is mentioned by Cohen (1946, cited in Singer, 1970, chapter, IV): "humanity would probably perish from cold if everyone produced food, and would certainly starve if everyone made clothes or built houses." Singer tries to resolve this problem by *invertible* technique. This technique is that in a case in which the consequences of everyone‟s acting in a certain way would be undesirable, while the consequences of no one‟s acting in that way would also be undesirable (Singer, 1970, chapter, IV).

Now the question arises that when a generalization argument becomes invertible or invalid or inapplicable. According to Singer‟s view, the arguments becomes invertible in the cases of human being‟s three basic needs such as producing food, making cloths, and building houses. Except these, there are other instances are invertible, particularly to say, coordination problem in a group, generalization argument is incapable of

dealing with many vital questions claimed by Rahman (1999, p. 103). According to him, the universal acceptance of such a principle of generalization argument would paralyse a group and hence affect on the maximization of utility. So we can claim that generalization argument should be applied with care so that it is not ridiculous.

## Justice and UG

We may now examine UG from justice perspective especially when it is discovered by Harrison (1953) that Hume‟s notion of justice is compatible with UG. Especially we get Hume‟s compatibility of justice with UG from his distinction between benevolence and justice in terms of virtues. About benevolence he notes that "as the good resulting from an act of benevolence is in itself complete and entire, it also excites the moral sentiment of approbation without any reflection on further consequences, and without any more enlarged views of the concurrence or imitation of the other members of the society."(Hardin, 1980), On the contrary, about justice Hume says, "The case is not the same with social virtues of justice and fidelity. They are highly useful, or indeed absolutely necessary to the well-being of mankind; but the benefit resulting from them is not the consequence of every individual single act; but arises from the whole scheme or system concurred in by the whole, or the greater part of the society." (cited in Harrison, 1953, p. 108).

It means that Hume‟s notion of the good resulting from acts of justice is distinctively different from the consequence of acts of an individual. According to him, justice consists in the general applicability. For example, if either person does not row, the boat will not progress. Hence, the good, which consists in the progress of the boat, requires infallible participation by all concerned (Hume, 1957, 123).

But this conclusion is a consequence of the logic of the number two in this case, and it need not be generalized to the convention of justice in a society of considerably more than two people with hundred of rowers. Justice is not fragile as to fall with a single miscarriage, but it can fall with frequent enough miscarriages (Hardin, 1980). In addition it can be said that if an irregular driver drives his car in the right lane violating the conventional rules, then it will not hamper the safety of his driving, and in consequence, will not affect the violation of justice.

Harrison (1953, pp.111-112) shows that there are some criticisms against Hume‟s view about the universal application of the notion justice. Firstly, the view that we must be just in this particular case, so that the good consequent upon the practice of justice as a whole should be brought about, is unrealistic. It is simply false that the performance of every just action is necessary if the good produced by the practice of justice is to be secured. If this were true, the human race would have perished miserably many years ago. An occasional act of injustice here and there does not undermine the whole beneficial effect of the practice of justice, and, if such actions are performed in secret, they may sometimes not even produce any harmful effect at all. Here in this point we can say that Harrison mentions another problem relating justice in terms of private morality and public morality. And it is a debatable issue that cannot be settled easily.

Secondly, the view that we must be just, it is our duty to be just and just actions are severely necessary to the production of the good of justice. Our normal view is like these practices of justice. We think that we should not turn aside from justice whenever it seems that an unjust action would produce some good. But on the other hand, we do think that there are occasions on which unjust actions should be performed, because the good to be gained is considerable. But, if the whole of the good consequent upon the practice of justice were dependent upon the performance of just actions in every particular case, it is difficult to believe that the consequences of any individual unjust action, considered in itself, could ever be good enough to justify me in performing it. I must, therefore, apply rules of justice in all circumstances, however trivial, and however great the immediate good to be gained by neglecting them.

Here Harrison takes a circular argument when he connects the concept of justice with another concept „just action.‟ Moreover, he also writes about an important dilemma in maintaining justice and good consequence at the same time. We have to preserve justice and good consequence at the same time. But it is not always possible as sometimes just action produces good consequence and sometimes unjust action produces good consequence. This is really a difficult problem to reconcile UG with good consequence.

**Disutility of UG**

Normally, utilitarian generalization theory is adopted for the purpose of maximizing utility. If a particular action can bring optimal benefit then there is enough reason why this particular action will not be accepted generally. In other words, to say, why everyone will not consider this particular action in general way. The principle that one should perform actions, the general practice of which would be beneficial, is often used as an argument for pacifism, and with some plausibility. If everybody were to refrain participating in wars, there would be no wars; hence it is one‟s duty to refrain from participating in wars, whether anybody else co-operates with one or not. But the same principle can be used to justify actions, which even a pacifist would condemn. If nobody were to lay violent hands upon the persons of his neighbours, or upon their property, everyone would live in peace with his fellow men and this desirable state of affairs would be in imagination not in practice.

In practice, we see that maintaining UG gives the result of disutility. There are some actions which we think we have a duty to refrain from doing, even though they themselves produce no harmful consequences, because such actions would produce harmful consequences if their performance became the general rule. I think I have a duty to vote for that person whose party I think would govern the nation best, although I do not think that the addition of my vote to the total number of votes which are cast for him is going to make any difference to the result of the election, simply because I realize that, if all his other supporters were to do as I do, and fail to go to the polls, the man would not be elected. I refrain from walking on the grass of a well-kept park lawn, not because I think that my walking on the grass is going to damage the lawn to such an extent as to detract from anybody‟s pleasure in contemplating it, but because I realize that, if everybody else who walked in the park were to do likewise, the grass in the park would be spoilt. (Harrison, 1953. p. 107)

Harrison‟s examples above describe the disutility of UG. But we may find different picture also. There are some actions, which we think we have a duty to do, although they themselves produce no good consequences, because such actions would produce good consequences, if they were generally practised. For example, in the election rule of 2008 in Bangladesh there is a provision of „no‟ vote if a voter prefers no candidate, then he or she has an option to vote „no‟. We may suppose that

all candidates in an electoral constitution are either terror or corrupted. If any of them wins, then the consequences will be bad. So a particular vote to „no‟ option cannot bring good consequences, rather if everyone would vote for „no‟ option and as a result if „no‟ option wins then there will be a possibility of good consequences.

Sometimes it is argued that the lying and promise breaking might be logically possible in community where false promise and lying are universally practised. It can be said that in a universally lying practised society everything will go on as usual like greetings, curses, questions etc. and these will not hamper utility maximization. In this regard, we may say that lying can be practised if lying can be a model or standard, then it will not hamper utility maximization. For example, if all people call book by ball and ball by book, then it will not hamper utility maximization. On the other hand, if lying is practised as inconsistent phenomena then it will be a problem. For example, if sometimes, we call book by ball and sometimes by glass, then it will be a problem.

However, the application of UG principle in practice will not always produce disutility. Instead we see sometimes a utility maximization such as in practising UG, cooperative enterprise and responsibility to others are established. For example[1], the passengers in a life-boat have a collective task. All should cooperate if they are to survive. It follows that everybody has already got the best possible prudential reason to contribute to the cooperative effort. At the same time a kind of duty and responsibility to others grow in this cooperative task.

## UG and the Problem of 'Difference'

Sometimes our single utility question needs a justification and for this justification the UG principle comes. Especially if we would like to do an immoral act then the question arises how far this single utility act is justified through UG principle. There may have two different situations in applying UG formula.  One situation is that „What would happen if I do this‟ and „What would happen if everyone does this‟. The question arises what will be the difference in two situations. These two different situations can be called the problem of difference and this is one of the significant points for the critical examination of UG. Jonathan Glover and M. J. Scott-

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[1]  This example is taken from Govert den Hartogh: *Mutual Expectations: A Conventionilist Theory of Law.* 2002, p. 74.

Taggart (1975, pp. 171-209) examine this problem of difference in their article "It Makes no Difference whether or not I Do It." They raise the issue in such way, "Sometimes it is said that the only reason why the scientist"s claim, that if he does not work on chemical warfare someone else will, seems plausible as a defense is a mistaken concentration on the consequences of the act of a single person. It is suggested that we should not ask „what difference will make if I do this", but „what difference would it make if everyone did this?" Here the generalization test is used as an indirect justification of a single person"s act. It can be said that the problem of difference can properly be understood by the generalization test.

On the other hand, Lyons thinks that there is no difference between the first question and the second question. In other words, the question relating to single person"s act and question relating to UG answer the same but it depends on adequate formulation. We would probably give different answers to the crude question "what if everyone broke his promises?" and to the slightly more subtle question "what if everyone broke his promises when this was necessary to save someone"s life?" Lyons argues that utilitarians applying the generalization test has to include in the description of the act all those features that affect the utility of the outcome. So, in the case of the scientist and chemical warfare, we have to ask, not the odd question, "what would happen if all scientists worked on chemical warfare?", but some such complicated question as "what would happen if all those biologists who had these special skills, and who were offered jobs in chemical warfare accepted the jobs in those cases where, if they refused, someone else equally able would accept?" This question is itself no doubt over-simplified, but it seems that the more complete in the relevant respects the description becomes, the closer the generalization test comes to giving the same answer the one gets to the question "what will happen if I do this?" Lyons here reconciles the question relating to single act and the question relating to generalization test by complex way. By this way, his approach is a kind of attempt transforming from abstract generalization to concrete one.

Similarly, Singer (1970) also reconciles two types of principles: one is the principle of the generalization argument and another is the principle of [simple] consequences. According to his principle of generalization argument, if the consequences of A"s doing x would be undesirable, then

no one ought to do x, i.e., everyone ought not to do x. On the contrary, his principle of consequences holds that if the consequences of A‟s doing x would be undesirable, A ought not to do. Singer claims that above these two principles do not conflict, for the reason that A also is included in the class of „everyone.‟

J. H. Sobel (1970) opposes Lyons and Singer‟s views. According to his view in applying UG it is important to understand other people‟s behaviour although it is difficult to understand it. If other people‟s behaviour is not understood, then two above discussed questions will produce different answers. Sobel uses Prisoner‟s Dilemma type cases (voting case and disarmament case) to show that such restrictions can result in the generalization test sometimes giving different answers from those obtained by the simple question about the consequences of a single person‟s act.

But there is a difficulty or difference between the generalization test and the outcome of simple consequence. And this difference produces worse result. This is because the features of other people‟s behaviour that we think insignificant often in fact alter the desirability of the outcome. Sobel‟s prisoner‟s dilemma cases briefly discussed by Glover and Scott-Taggart (1975) which are as follows: If I am not allowed to take into account how many other people are voting, the generalization test is likely to tell me to vote at some inconvenience to myself, even where my vote will not influence the outcome. If a nation in a balance of terror situation is not allowed to take into account the predictable response of other nations, the generalization test may tell it to disarm in a situation where the outcome will be that, as the only disarmed nation, it is destroyed. Such acts may be noble, but in selecting for them we have abandoned consequentialism.

The generalization test could only help us and it depends upon two conditions. One condition is that if there were a version of it that would give answers that sometimes differed from those given to the simple test. Similarly, according to another condition, such cases would not generate a worse total outcome. Until such a version has been found that met the above two conditions, the generalization test will not be popular. In other words, UG version ought to bring good consequence and it ought to have a clear demarcation from the single utility question.

## Conclusion

In fine, we may say that one can debate whether UG can be considered an independent theory, rather it is a by-product of other theory especially it is argued that UG is somehow related to act-utilitarianism as UG is extensionally equivalent to AU (Act-Utilitarianism) claimed by Lyons. Similarly, there can be given some arguments in favour of showing equivalence relation between RU (Rule-Utilitarianism) and UG especially on the basis of hypothetically assuming any rule in a more general way. However, we have identified some limits such as ambiguity in terms, rhetorical idea, UG and justice, disutility of UG and problem of difference etc. These limits are overlapping to a great extent. Because, in each limit we have pointed out some counter arguments and these counter arguments refer to some kind of problem.

However, there arises a rich argumentative field in this classification which has attracted more attention among moral thinkers or philosophers.

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