BIOETHICS SEMINAR

Should Public Health Be Utilitarian? Theories, Limits and Applications

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155 College St., Room 108 (main floor, to the right of the elevators)

Abstract: The goal of public health, in perhaps its simplest terms, is to promote the health of populations and to protect or minimize threats to the health of populations. Intuitively, this goal appears to be utilitarian in nature as public health seeks to maximize the greatest good (in this case, health) for the greatest number of people (i.e. the population). Indeed, much of academic literature and many policies and frameworks in public health and public health ethics acknowledge the important, if not foundational, role of utilitarianism in public health. However, at the same time, there seems to be a near-consensus rejection of the utilitarian doctrine as the sole moral guide for public health. Many public health scholars maintain that important considerations like human rights, liberty, equality, and concern for the most disadvantaged—those considerations and ideals purported to be more aligned with social justice than utilitarianism—are often cited as fundamental to the vision of public health, and have been suggested to be in conflict with the tenets of utilitarianism. Therefore, there seems to be an uneasy tension within public health to both promote and object to utilitarianism. We will argue that this concomitant acknowledgement and rejection of the role of utilitarianism in public health is due, perhaps in part, to an uncritical understanding of utilitarianism and its many forms. The goal of our presentation is to consider the idea that utilitarianism may have a role in public health by (a) critically exploring the diverse forms and limitations of utilitarianism, (b) analyzing the nuanced features, goals, and considerations of utilitarian approaches that might be aligned with, or perhaps constitutive of, a ‘social justice’ vision of public health, and (c) considering the role and application of utilitarianism in a public health case study involving the application of JS Mill’s harm principle in the treatment of tuberculosis.