

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College
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Lecture Notes, September 20

I. Continuing our explication of the utilitarian theory.

Morality, for the utilitarian, is a question of performing the right actions.
We determine right actions by calculating the consequent happiness.
But utilitarianism is not a defense of pleasure-seeking, in a narrow sense.
It can account for short term sacrifice in the hopes of long term gains, for oneself.
For example, working hard to get a college degree.
This is like moving from $A=B=10$ to $A=9, B=12$, where A represents your current self, and B is you later.
The question one asks is: Does the happiness I gain later outweigh the happiness I sacrifice now?

Utilitarianism works well on large scale:
Should the Fed raise interest rates?
Should the U.S. go to war with Iraq?
Should I vote for Kerry or Bush?

But, is it the right moral theory?

II. Examining the three clauses.

Consequentialism:
Utilitarianism captures our bare intuition that consequences matter.
It's better than 'don't lie', 'don't kill', or any other absolute proscription.
There are times when any such specific prohibition might be better violated.
Consider being stopped by the SS when transporting Jews out of Nazi Germany.
It's better than: 'you must fulfill your promises': meeting some one for lunch vs saving an accident victim.
In other words, it's a more honest theory in that it builds in the exceptions.
Instead of a lot of detailed rules, it gives you one flexible, general guideline.

Hedonism:
How does Mill defend the theory?
Consider any good thing. Why is it good?
We can show that it traces back to happiness.

Mill's argument for hedonism, p 30:
1. Every one wants to be happy.
2. If we all followed utilitarianism, then happiness would increase.
∴ Utilitarianism is the right moral theory.

Even God likes it: she made us all want to be happy. (p 29)
[Consider whether the second premise is true.]

Egalitarianism:

Maybe some people are worth more than others.

But the utilitarian can account for this, without abandoning the basic egalitarianism.

Consider Godwin's argument that the archbishop is worth more than the chambermaid. (p 243)

This defense is actually utilitarian.

He's worth more for two reasons:

1) He affects more people.

2) He has the capacity for a higher degree of happiness. (See below, Criticism #1.)

The utilitarian, can defend the higher value of the archbishop, without dropping egalitarianism.

The president isn't himself worth more, but actions that affect him, and which he performs will also affect others. There's no need to count each one as more than one.

Consider some criticisms

Along the way, try to notice forms of responses:

One can dismiss the objection

One can adjust the theory in response to the objection.

One can reject the theory, abandon it, in the face of insuperable criticism.

Criticism #1: Happiness is a life for pigs. (p 27)

That is, utilitarianism provides too low a standard for morality.

Response: there are higher and lower pleasures.

Since the higher pleasures are more valuable, the standard is not too low.

We have to decide between pleasures, so we need a criterion.

We can ask some one who has had both.

Those who have had both higher and lower pleasures will say that some pleasures require work, but are worth it.

Godwin's defends the archbishop's "more refined and genuine happiness". (p 243)

Mill says, "It is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."

This objection may thus be dismissed.

We just look to long term and quality of happiness, and the problem is solved.

So, let's dismiss this criticism.

Criticism #2: Happiness isn't our ultimate goal in life.

Consider an accident which renders a young pianist unable to use her hands, but whose happiness may be insured by a 'happy pill'.

If the utilitarian says that all that matters is happiness, and the happiness I maintained, it seems that the utilitarian has no means for describing why this is a bad outcome.

Mill says fulfilling your goals is a means to your happiness, but maybe the goal is independent of happiness.

One might try to dismiss this objection as an implausible scenario: of course the happiness would be decreased.