Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2005
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Lecture Notes, February 14

I. How do utilitarians measure happiness?

Morality, for the utilitarian, is a question of performing the right actions.
We determine right actions by calculating the consequent happiness.

Jeremy Bentham provided seven ways to measure it:
Intensity;
Duration;
Certainty;
Propinquity (proximity);
Fecundity (capability to produce more, followed by similar feelings);
Purity (chance it has of not being followed by opposite sensations);
Extent.

We can talk about units of happiness (utils), but we must be careful to distinguish them from money.
Law of diminishing returns: more money is always more money, but not always more happiness.
Cold drink on a hot day, the first is great, the twelfth is not so good.
There may be a problem with quantifying happiness.
But economists do this all the time.

II. How does utilitarianism work, in practice?

Imagine a world in which there are two people, John and Harriet, and each has 10 units of happiness.

Harriet wonders whether she should gather some flowers.
The new totals would be: John=10, Harriet=12
Total is now 22, so she should do it.

Another day, John=10, Harriet=10
John wonders if he should gather flowers for Harriet.
John does not like flowers, but Harriet does. John would prefer to go swimming.
The new totals would be:
John=9, Harriet=12.
The total increases to 21, so John should do it.

Notice the requirement of self-sacrifice.
Utilitarianism encourages working hard to get a raise, to provide better for ones family.
Or going out of the way for a stranger in dire need.
Sacrifice has its limits, though.
We should not give more than is gained.

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 we legalize gay marriage?

But, is it the right moral theory?

II. Examining the three clauses.

Consequentialism:
Utilitarianism captures our bare intuition that consequences matter.
It is better than "Don't lie,", and "Don't kill," or any other absolute proscription.
There are times when any such specific prohibition should be violated.
Consider being stopped by the SS when transporting Jews out of Nazi Germany.
It is better than, "You must fulfill your promises."
Meeting some one for lunch vs saving an accident victim.
In other words, it is 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 69:
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 68.
[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 240.
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.