

Philosophy 104, Ethics, Queens College, Spring 2005  
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Lecture Notes, February 16

### I. Considering criticisms of utilitarianism

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.

### II. Criticism #1: Happiness is a life for pigs, p 66.

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 240.

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, dismiss this criticism.

### III. Criticism #2: Happiness is not 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 is 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.

We considered an example of a situation which appears to be an undesirable outcome, the pianist's loss of the use of her hands, but which, because of the happy pill, the utilitarian can not evaluate as undesirable.

And we discussed two utilitarian responses to this criticism.

One dismisses the objection as an implausible scenario, there is no such thing as a happiness pill.

But still, it is logically possible, and it would be nice if the utilitarian could account for it.

The utilitarian can also claim that our intuitions in this case are wrong.

If we really had a happy pill, then even if the pianist lost the use of her hands, as long as she were happy, we shouldn't see this as a problem.

We are misled by our intuitions, here.

This response also dismisses the criticism.

#### IV. A different kind of response to Criticism #2

If we are convinced that the utilitarian inappropriately emphasizes happiness, we can drop the happiness clause (hedonism) from utilitarianism.

We still maintain the consequentialism and the egalitarianism.

But we are left without a guideline for evaluating consequences.

We need to replace hedonism with something.

Consider replacing hedonism with appeal to personal preferences.

This would capture what is wrong with the scenario above.

The pianist may be happy, but not in the way she prefers.

This proposal generates preference utilitarianism:

The right act is the one that creates the greatest fulfillment of personal preferences for the greatest number.

Notice that the theory is still saved, though amended.

Unfortunately, there are serious problems with preference utilitarianism.

We really don't want to fulfill unacceptable preferences, like those of Nazis.

The classical (i.e. hedonistic) utilitarian can oppose genocide, even if the vast majority prefer it, by appeal to the various measures of happiness, quantity, quality, long-term, etc.

This seems more difficult to do in terms of preferences.

#### V. Criticism #3: Utilitarianism has difficulty accounting for our notions of justice.

Consider a situation in which better consequences arise from performing an injustice.

For example, sacrificing an innocent to quell an angry mob.

In general, utilitarianism, which is forward-looking, seems to conflict with justice, which is backward-looking.