

Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W

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Class #25 - Consequentialism

The Three Clauses of Utilitarianism

- “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure” (Mill 141a).
- We can analyze the utilitarian theory into three clauses:
 - U1: *Consequentialism* Acts are judged by their consequences.
 - U2: *Hedonism* Consequences are evaluated by the amount of total happiness they bring.
 - U3: *Egalitarianism* Each person counts as one.

Consequentialism

- Utilitarianism captures our bare intuition about the moral relevance of consequences.
- By focusing on consequences rather than categorical rules, utilitarianism can be flexible.
- Moral theories which include specific rules like “Don’t lie,” and “Don’t kill,” or any other absolute proscription may be refuted by simple counterexamples.
 - Danish fishing boats
 - “You must fulfill your promises.”
 - There are times when any such specific prohibition should be violated.

Consequences and Exceptions

- Utilitarianism is thus a more honest theory than one which provides universal moral rules.
- It builds in the exceptions we ordinarily deem acceptable or even required.
- Utilitarianism tells us how to determine if an act would be an exception to any general rule or guideline.
- Universal prescriptions do not tell us their limits.
- Instead of a lot of detailed rules and confusion about when they apply, utilitarianism gives you one flexible, general always-applicable guideline.

Hedonism

- Classical utilitarianism is an Epicurean philosophy: happiness, or pleasure, is the goal of life.
 - ▶ “The ultimate end, with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people), is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality; the test of quality, and the rule for measuring it against quantity, being the preference felt by those who in their opportunities of experience, to which must be added their habits of self-consciousness and self-observation, are best furnished with the means of comparison” (Mill 144a).
- Bentham’s seven ways to measure happiness.
 - ▶ B1. Intensity
 - ▶ B2. Duration
 - ▶ B3. Certainty
 - ▶ B4. Propinquity (proximity) or remoteness
 - ▶ B5. Fecundity (capability to produce more, followed by similar feelings)
 - ▶ B6. Purity (the chance an experience has of not being followed by opposite sensations)
 - ▶ B7. Extent
- B1 - B4 measure the pain itself.
- B5 and B6 measure the tendency of an action related to other actions.
- B7 measures the way in which an act affects other people.
- To calculate the total effects of an act, you just add up all the effects on each individual.

Utils

- To add effects, we can imagine some basic units of happiness which have been called utils.
- We must be careful to distinguish utils from money and other fungible goods.
- Money abides by a law of diminishing returns
 - More money is always more money.
 - More money does not always lead to more happiness.
 - The first cold drink on a hot day is great but the twelfth is not so good.
- Utils do not suffer diminishing returns.
- There may be problems quantifying happiness.
 - interpersonal comparisons of happiness
- Economists make interpersonal comparisons all the time.
 - Though economists often work with preferences, rather than happiness, they do so with the implicit assumption that we are happy when our preferences are fulfilled.

Mill on Hedonism

- “If human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness, we can have no other proof, and we require no other, that these are the only things desirable. If so, happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct...” (Mill 145b).
- Every one wants to be happy, and if we all followed utilitarianism, then happiness would increase.

Egalitarianism

- The egalitarian clause of utilitarianism, U3, is not very controversial.
- It is true that we value some people more than others: the President of the United States, Albert Pujols, Lady Gaga.
- The utilitarian can account for valuing some people over others without abandoning egalitarianism.
- There is a good question about how widely to extend the egalitarianism.
 - Should replicants be counted?
 - Aliens?
 - Dolphins or chimps?
- The answers to the questions we studied earlier in the course about personal identity and consciousness are essential to determining the range of our moral theory.

Adjusting Classical Utilitarianism

- Many abandon U2, exchanging it for other ways to evaluate consequences.
- Others abandon U3, though giving up egalitarianism is not a standard move.
- Any version of utilitarianism will be consequentialist.

Utilitarianism and Egoism

- It is tempting to misinterpret utilitarianism as egoism, so it will be worthwhile to distinguish the two theories.
- Utilitarianism says that the right act is the one which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.
- Ethical egoism says that the right act is the one which produces the greatest happiness for me.
 - ▶ Consider an ethical egoist named Al.
 - ▶ Al believes that every one else should act to serve Al.
 - ▶ The utilitarian, in contrast, says that we should all act for the benefit of everyone.
- Egoism and Prudence
 - ▶ Distinguish ethical egoism from the more plausible claim that every one should act to serve him or her self.
 - ▶ The latter claim is just self-interest, or prudence, and is really a form of subjectivism.
 - ▶ The egoist says that everyone should serve me.
 - ▶ The person who urges selfishness or prudence for everyone says that we should all act to serve ourselves.

Psychological Egoism

- One might be inclined to follow only one's self-interest because of psychological egoism.
 - No one ever does anything that he or she does not want to do.
- Faced with someone who sacrifices for others, a Mother Teresa, say, the psychological egoist says that sacrifice must be rewarding to that person.
- Psychological egoism may well be right.
- But it is irrelevant to ethics.
- It leaves us with no way to distinguish among good, not so good, and truly bad people or actions.
- It is philosophically vacuous, even if psychologically compelling.
- Utilitarianism is thus not the claim that we should act only in our own interests, nor that everyone should act in one's own interest.
- It is the claim that we should all act in ways that best further every one's interests.

Utilitarianism in Practice I

- Imagine a world in which there are two people, John and Harriet, and each has ten units of happiness.
- Harriet wonders whether she should gather some flowers.
 - ▶ Having some flowers would increase her happiness by, say, two units.
 - ▶ The new totals would be: John = 10, Harriet = 12.
 - ▶ Since the new total would be 22, which is greater than 20, she should gather the flowers.
- We have a moral duty to increase our own happiness.

Utilitarianism in Practice II

- 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 values would be John = 9, Harriet = 12.
 - The total would increase from 20 to 21.
 - So John should forego swimming to get the flowers for Harriet.
- We have a moral duty to sacrifice ourselves for others, when the rewards are greater than the sacrifice when every one's happiness is measured.

Utilitarianism in Practice III

- Utilitarianism encourages working hard to get a raise, to provide better for one's family.
- We should go out of our way for a stranger in dire need.
- Sacrifice has its limits, though.
- We should not give more than is gained.
- If John really hates collecting flowers and Harriet only like flowers a little bit, then there is no moral requirement for John to go pick them.
- The requirement of self-sacrifice also prevents utilitarianism from supporting immediate pleasure-seeking, in a narrow sense.
- We are often required to sacrifice in the short term in the hopes of long term gains, for oneself.
- For example, many of us calculate that we should work hard to get a college degree.
- The question to ask is whether the happiness I will gain later outweighs the happiness I sacrifice now.
- The trolley problem
- The ends justify the means; what else could?

Too Much Sacrifice?

- The utilitarian's demands for sacrifice may be extreme.
- The utilitarian must put her own interests aside, and treat herself as one individual affected by her actions.
- It looks like I should give away most of my belongings in order to try to combat humanity's worst conditions: famine and disease and war.
- This impartiality may be impractical.
- Mill agrees that it is difficult, but does not see this difficulty as a problem for the theory.
 - ▶ “Those among [the objectors to utilitarianism] who entertain anything like a just idea of its disinterested character, sometimes find fault with its standard as being too high for humanity. They say it is exacting too much to require that people shall always act from the inducement of promoting the general interests of society. But this is to mistake the very meaning of a standard of morals, and confound the rule of action with the motive of it. It is the business of ethics to tell us what are our duties, or by what test we may know them...”(Mill 144a-b).

Average Happiness or Total Happiness?

- When considering large-scale applications of utilitarianism, interesting questions arise about whether to consider average happiness or total happiness.
- To increase average happiness in a community, we can (quietly) kill all of those whose happiness is below average.
- To increase the total, we can require a population explosion.
- Total utilitarianism seems preferable, since the population explosion will have long-term ill-effects.
- But, I'll put these questions aside, here.

Utilitarianism and Justice

- “A magistrate or judge is faced with a very real threat from a large and uncontrollable mob of rioters demanding a culprit for a crime. Unless the criminal is produced, promptly tried, and executed, they will take their own bloody revenge on a much smaller and quite vulnerable section of the community (a kind of frenzied pogrom). The judge knows that the real culprit is unknown and that the authorities do not even have a good clue as to who he may be. But he also knows that there is within easy reach a disreputable, thoroughly disliked, and useless man, who, though innocent, could easily be framed so that the mob would be quite convinced that he was guilty and would be pacified if he were promptly executed. Recognizing that he can prevent the occurrence of extensive carnage only by framing some innocent person, the magistrate has him framed, goes through the mockery of a trial, and has him executed” (Kai Neilson).
- Two other cases of utilitarian problems with justice
 - ▶ a brilliant scientist who murders his wife while developing a cure for cancer
 - ▶ the extreme punishment of parking offenders

Justice and Precedence

- The utilitarian account of justice depends on emphasizing the precedent effect.
- If you break a promise, you encourage others to break their promises.
- Thus, the consequentialist urges us to keep our promises, not because there is something special about making a promise, but because the consequences of breaking that promise are generally worse, in the long run, than the consequences of keeping it.
- The precedent of judicial miscreance, in Nielson's case, may have such an overwhelming negative effect that it would not be worth sacrificing the innocent person.
- We could probably find other good scientists to take up the murderer's work or arrange a situation in which he could continue his work while incarcerated.
- The case of the parking offenders is particularly implausible, on reflection.
- Who is really served by such a well-observed law?
- Do we really think that Singapore's proscriptions against chewing gum are socially useful?

Utilitarianism and Rights

- The beefy spelunker
 - Again, precedents
 - The utilitarian can argue that she is not ignoring the rights or interests of the fat man, or acting callously.
 - Utilitarians merely point out that we should also weigh the rights and interests of those who will die unless we kill him.
- The peeping tom, who secretly adds his own happiness to the world's total.
- It looks like the utilitarian has to defend the peeper despite the violation of rights.
- Justice and rights and utilitarianism are sometimes incompatible.
- Utilitarianism requires we look forward, justice that we look backward.
- In these cases, either we give up our notions of justice or we give up utilitarianism.
- The borderline cases are difficult, and we should not reject a moral theory on the basis of weird cases.
- The objections concerning justice and rights are reasonable enough that we might not merely dismiss them.

Utilitarianism Summary

- Astronauts on a moonwalk
 - ▶ The utilitarian defends promise-keeping on the basis of precedents and expectations.
 - ▶ You should keep your promises because of the expectations of those to whom you promise, and the precedent set for others who see you break your promises.
 - ▶ No one else knows about the astronaut's promise, so breaking it will not create any ill precedents.
 - ▶ Any guilt is residual evidence of non-utilitarian presuppositions.
- There seems to be something wrong with the assumption that no promise was ever made, even if, in the end, you do break the promise.
- We have been trying to show that utilitarianism fails to account for important intuitions: justice, desert, promise-keeping.
 - ▶ These problems are all backwards-looking.
 - ▶ When presented with such cases, either we give up the theory or the intuitions.
 - ▶ But it is not always clear which to cede.
- Another way to criticize a theory is to present a preferable alternative.
 - ▶ In this vein, we shall examine Kant's ethics.