

Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W

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Class #26 - Consequentialism Wrap-Up

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.

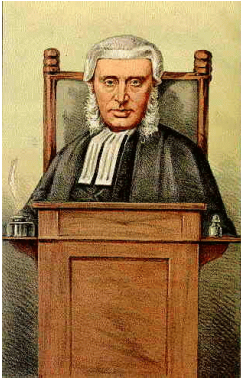
Mill on Hedonism

- “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.



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 Nielson).
- 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?



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.